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Character education (CE) in schools has been reported to support a safe school environment in which adults and students can embrace core ethical values such as respect, fairness, and responsibility, for example (Pala, 2011). It has the power to not only “cultivate minds [but] nurture hearts” as well (Pala, 2011, p. 26). The creation of a safe teaching and learning environment in which students and staff engage in critical discourse of ethical issues related character development can produce an atmosphere of human beings who feel better about themselves and their work. As a result, one cannot overlook the implications for school improvement that character education presents for those courageous enough to purposefully and intently engage its implementation in schools.

Given the troubling trends in today’s youth substantiated by research (Dahlberg, Toal, Swahn, & Behrens, 2005; Garofalo, Wolf, Kessel, Palfrey, & Durant, 1998; Lickona, 1996; Pena, Matthieu, Zayas, Masyn, & Caine, 2012), the purpose of this study was to investigate stakeholder perceptions of the influence of an exemplary character education program’s implementation in a middle school and its contribution to school improvement.

This study was a qualitative interview study in which 19 participants from teachers, support staff, administrators, and a parent were asked their insight regarding the implementation of an exemplary character education program that was grounded in the

Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education. The interview study coupled with document analysis was the approach necessary to address the central research question: How did the three-year implementation of an exemplary middle school character education program contribute to school improvement at a middle school that was recognized for its exemplary character education program?

Over a three-year period of character education program implementation, BOA Middle, experienced reductions in its out-of-school suspensions by over 65%, increased staff attendance, reduced teacher turnover from 33% to 11%, was named a PCS district Highly Enhanced School, met 29 of 29 academic targets, was named a Positive Behavior Intervention Support Model School for the state due to its exemplary character education program, experienced high growth as determined by student achievement and state accountability data, and met federal accountability growth standards.

Through this study, the following themes emerged regarding participants' perceptions about the implementation of the exemplary character education program:

- Character is Multidimensional
- CE is 24/7/365
- Implementation requires consistency
- CE fosters school improvement as Adults Lead and Students Achieve
- School communities can support CE through Collaboration, Service Learning, and Reflection.

STAKEHOLDER PERCEPTIONS OF AN EXEMPLARY MIDDLE SCHOOL  
CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAM AND ITS IMPLICATIONS  
FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

by

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This dissertation is dedicated to my dad, Carl, and my nephew, Christian.

Dad, if you were here, I hope you'd smile and say, "Well done, son" then do that laugh you always did. Because of you, I love my family, do my best to treat people right, and I go to work wearing a shirt and tie—just like you did. I love you, Dad.

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## APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation, written by John Carlos M. Miller, has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

A society and its corresponding culture pass from one generation to the next. While there are good components to any culture, there are those facets of a society that generations can do without. The preservation of the good components are significant to the progression of the society for years to come, but the influence of societal negativism have the potential to lead to the culture's ultimate demise.

Education is a vehicle through which society attempts to sustain its moral components. Character education and development within the educational sector can provide the social impetus for cultivating a society in which the good outweighs the bad. While educators cannot render a definite result through character development of students in their care, the adults connected to a child's educational rearing, including parents, teachers, administrators, and other education professionals can produce potentially profound outcomes. Edward Wynne, a professor at Illinois University (as cited in Character Development Center, 2013) alluded to this sentiment stating,

We can assume that attention to character development will be good for pupils, their families, educators, and the nation for, in the end, the welfare and the very existence of our society does not so much depend on the IQ's of its inhabitants, as on their character. (n.p.)

Thomas Lickona, the Father of the Character Education in the United States, reported,

If schools wish to maximize their moral clout, making a lasting difference in students' character . . . they need a comprehensive, holistic approach (one where schools) look at themselves through a moral lens and consider how virtually everything that goes on there affects the values and character of students. (as cited in Character Development Center, 2013, n.p.)

### **My Character Journey Begins**

My father was a career teacher, and I recall the stories he would come home and tell my mother and other two siblings about his adventures in his biology class that day. There were several students who concerned my dad both academically and socially; however, he never made a negative remark about one of his students. He would always say, "If that boy or girl could only see what I know they can become." He also would make positive remarks about the students before he addressed his concerns with his students.

Then there were the summers when my brother and I would go to the Kinston High School with him to assist him with his summer obligations. My father always made my brother and me clean out his back storage room filled sometimes with broken Petri dishes, activity sheets, project rubrics, and the like. After the job was completed, he instructed us to take the trash bags to the dumpster. Unfortunately, one summer I made the mistake of saying, "Isn't that Mr. James's job?" My father, with all the love and responsibility he felt for me, smacked me in the mouth and told me that I should never make a statement like that again. Mr. James was the school's lead custodian who worked the summers that we were there also. My brother and I often saw our father having

conversations with Mr. James, and I always wondered why my father, a highly respected teacher, spent so much time conversing with a custodian. After the smack in the mouth, I never asked him that question, but in this process my father was teaching my brother and me a valuable lesson—to treat everyone as we wanted to be treated. He also instilled in us responsibility and fairness to the extent that we desired to be viewed as the best kids on the block.

Respect was the order of the day for our father. Several times he reminded us to call people Mr. and Ms. My brother did ask if we had to call the cafeteria ladies Ms. as well, and he got the exact reminder that I received the previous summer – the smack in the mouth. Younger brothers just have to learn by their own experience I suppose. Though our dad was a war veteran, highly regarded teacher, and jack of all trades, he always treated everyone with a level of respect that would give even the lowliest of people a shot in the arm rendering them an enormous positive self-esteem.

I have often thought—couldn't dad have shown Brian and me how to be more respectful of our elders in a less painful way? As I have grown older, I believe dad's intent was to cultivate in me an empathetic rapport with people regardless of their position in life as it is critical to forging positive relationships with one another. For him, I believe his actions validate the sentiment held by Lotz (2014) "parents must be left substantially free to instill their deepest values in their children" (p. 250). He recalled the system of racism and bigotry that haunted him as a youngster as he witnessed the mistreatment and disrespect experienced by his mother—even after she had cleaned the "White folk's house" well. For him, his smacks in the mouth ran deep. Sure, they were

painful to us, but down what road were Brian and I headed asking, “Isn’t that Mr. James’s job?” or “Do I have to call the cafeteria ladies Ms.?” Dad was attempting to instill us boys the importance of knowing the power in treating everyone with the same level of respect one would want shown to himself. He often remarked to us children all the time, “Never treat anyone any less than what you would yourself.” This message has been forever written in my heart, mind, and spirit and is the cornerstone of the character model I attempt to exhibit in all I do.

On Bright Street in Kinston there were 12 African American boys and two White boys on our block. We thought we were the greatest thing since sliced bread; however, we would get into trouble doing idiotic things that boys sometimes do such as playing ball in the middle of a busy street and smoking cigarette butts left on the ground by others. It felt like we were living the life then, but we were only headed down a path that so many young boys find themselves travelling still today. Throughout my schooling though there were teachers in my life who would not allow me to act like some of the other young men in my community. Some of them were so brave as to call teachers horrible names, steal food from the cafeteria, and hide on the playground after everyone else had come into the class. I remember Mrs. Snider who was my kindergarten teacher, and she would say things like, “Now Johnny, you shouldn’t front the other children on the slide ‘cause that’s not fair to them.” Mrs. Abbott was my first grade teacher who would not allow me to quit on my math just because it got more difficult. She insisted that I work the problems to the best of my ability even if I screwed it up because she always said, “One incorrect problem is getting you that much closer to a correct one.

Keep working, son.” At the time I felt she was having some comic relief at my expense struggling on the problem. I later learned that it was her way of teaching me the perseverance that is necessary to conquer anything that we put our minds to doing.

### **Can I Get an Amen?**

I have always been raised in the church where the “Golden Rule” has always been stressed. Several religions have offered their interpretation of the Golden Rule (U.S. Department of Education, 2005):

- African Traditional religion: One going to take a pointed stick to pinch a baby bird should first try it on himself to see how it hurts.
- Buddhism: Hurt not others with that which pains thyself.
- Hinduism: Do nothing to thy neighbor which thou wouldst not have them do to thee.
- Islam: No one of you is a believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.
- Judaism: What you hate, do not to anyone.

My family was no different in reiterating the practice of treating others as we would want to be treated. Much of the foundation of character education has been built on this one facet that simply deals with respecting one’s fellowman. I have always worked with the premise that being courteous and considering others more than myself is the order of the day; however, I must consider the fact that not all people share this same sentiment.

### **What is Character?**

Researchers have recognized the merit that character education can afford. M. Davidson, Lickona, and Khmelkov (2008a) state,

Developing good character offers the hope of striking at the root of anti-social or self-destructive behaviors and thereby helping to correct and prevent them. This line of argument has sometimes been referred to as the “instrumental” case for character education because it is being offered as a means of ameliorating social ills. (p. 372)

I truly would love to see the components of character education instilled in every school building, classroom, and front office across America, because I do believe in the possibilities of school transformation that it can bring.

One’s character has the ability to cause others to gravitate towards him/her or make them withdraw from him/her. As I reflect on my collegiate involvement in the incorporation of a non-profit organization aimed at helping students at other colleges and universities, it was imperative that our organization embodied the characteristics we expected from our members and affiliates. The religious non-profit helped to partner new college students from across the country with religious assemblies and churches that resembled those they had left to pursue postsecondary education. The organization served as an ecclesiastical resource as well for students who were not sure of what characteristics they were hoping to find in an assembly. Some of the clients we served participated in lifestyles not aligned with our beliefs; however, my role as an executive board member, and more importantly, as a Christian, would not allow me to deny another college student an opportunity for the religious experience for which he was searching.

Though not perfect, my interactions with our clients caused me to reflect consistently on how I was conducting my own life whether anyone was in my vicinity or not. As a result, I feel I have lived and do live a life that is based on character encompassing good “habits of mind, habits of heart, habits of behavior” (Lickona, 2009, p. 51). How can one make such a claim about his/her life when character can be defined in various ways and is indeed used in different ways in common speech? We consider someone “a character” if s/he acts in an atypical fashion. We also commonly refer to “having character,” but sometimes that character is “good” or “bad” (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004). “Character is the complex set of psychological characteristics that enable an individual to act as a moral agent. In other words, character is multifaceted. It is psychological. It relates to moral functioning” (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004, p. 73). The following represent seven psychological aspects of character: moral action, moral values, moral personality, moral emotions, moral reasoning, moral identity, and foundational characteristics (Berkowitz, 2011a). Each of these characteristics develops over the life span and especially in childhood and adolescence. The predominant impact on this comes from family (Berkowitz & Grych, 1998; Lickona 1983), but schools must be a strong character developmental force given issues faced by youngsters (Berkowitz, 2011a; Gottfredson, 2001; Lickona, 2009).

### **Troubling Trends in Youth**

Lickona (1996) identified ten troubling youth trends that support the necessity of a character education focus in schools. While the list is not intended to be all-inclusive, it beckons the ear of anyone concerned with the current state of society. “Wise societies

since the time of Plato have made moral education a deliberate aim of school” (Lickona, 1991, p. 6).

### **Rising Youth Violence**

The first trend is rising youth violence (Dahlberg et al., 2005; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2009). The Centers for Disease Control (CDC, 2010) reports that violence amongst youths has become a significant public health problem. The report names homicide as the second leading cause of death for youngsters between the ages of 15 and 24 years old. Of the homicide victims between the ages of 10 and 24 years old, 86% of them were killed with a firearm (CDC, 2010). The study named several factors increasing violent behaviors from adolescence into young adulthood. Some of the factors named were the early onset of aggressive behavior in childhood, social problem-solving skill deficits, exposure to violence, poor parenting practices and family functioning, negative peer influences, access to firearms, and neighborhoods characterized by high rates of poverty, transiency, family disruption, and social isolation (CDC, 2010; Dahlberg et al., 2005).

### **Increasing Dishonesty**

The second trend Lickona identifies is increasing dishonesty brought on by lying (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2010; R. Davidson, 2009), which is one of the earliest behaviors to develop in childhood (Stouthamer-Loeber, 2002); cheating (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2010; R. Davidson, 2009), which is behavior to which school-aged children resort to improve academic results (Stoner 1991); and stealing (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2010; R. Davidson, 2009).



In a survey of over 8,500 students in grades nine through 12, over 6,000 students admitted to cheating on an exam in school. Another 7,912 students advised that they had lied to their parents. The survey also found that 40% of males and 30% of females had stolen something in their lifetime (Matula, 2004). If students are becoming increasingly dishonest as they navigate through their high school years, where does that behavior leave our future society in which we all will live?

### **Disrespect for Parents**

Lickona describes the third trend as a greater disrespect for parents (C. Davidson & DeVarney, 2009; Rosenberger, 2011); teachers (Kaufman et al., 2010; National Center for Education Statistics, 2009; Ray, 2009; Rodriguez, 2009), which has led to their subsequent burnout (Hastings & Bham, 2003; Chang, 2009); and other legitimate authority figures (Ray, 2009; Rodriguez, 2009). This disrespect presents a stressed school staff to parent to student interaction which complicates and strains the relationships critical to student success (Rodriguez, 2009).

### **Peer Cruelty**

Increasing peer cruelty (Lickona, 1996) is identified as the fourth trend which works to the detriment of helping students become smart and helping them become good (M. Davidson et al., 2008a). The past has yielded verbal or physical bullying (Erickson, 2010) which occurred within the schools (Conn, 2005); however, with the societal bombardment of technology, this cruelty has taken to cyberbullying (Brady & Conn, 2006). Cyberbullying is still somewhat a new phenomenon, and school leaders are unaware of where their jurisdiction falls.

The fact is that school staffs are obligated to teach their students to report cyberbullying. Preliminary evidence on incident of cyberbullying indicates that the problem is highly under-reported (Patchin & Hinkuja, 2006). Students must be assured by the adults charged with educating them that they [the school staff] will respond swiftly in the event cyberbullying is reported.

### **Bigotry**

A rise in bigotry and hate crime represents the fifth trend in which the disabled (Sherry, 2010); those living as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (Altschiller, 2005; Erickson, 2010; Wieland, 2007); and people of color (Altschiller, 2005; Erickson, 2010; Lawson, 2008) experience prejudicial treatment. Compared to the overall student population, gay, lesbian and bisexual students are more likely to report being threatened or injured with a weapon, and to skip school because of fear of harm (Garofalo et al., 1998; Wieland, 2007).

### **Language Deterioration**

The deterioration of language denotes the sixth trend which, at times, arises out of students' disagreements about issues. The students resort to using personal attacks, incendiary language, or making false claims about their adversaries. Watz (2011) reported verbal bullying of other students (Demoss, 2010) and talking back to the teacher described by Horace Mann (1796-1859) who noted these as undesirable behaviors. Profanity is increasingly common on the schoolyard, in corridors, and even in classrooms. Some parents have complained about the inappropriate language they hear when they come to the school, and many faculties feel that such language detracts from

the learning environment and is disrespectful toward those who don't wish to hear it (M. Davidson, Lickona, & Khmelkov, 2008b). The pop culture—movies, music, the Internet, and television—seems to encourage incivility with coarse and profane language and images that promote violence, sexual promiscuity, drug use, and endorse radical individualism and egocentric behaviors as virtues (Moore, 2012; Twenge, 2006). Mark Demoss, the founder of The Civility Project, asserted, “It seems our society has become increasingly divided and polarized. Every week we are treated to scenes of bitter fighting . . . name calling, and personal attacks” (Demoss, 2010; Watz, 2011).

### **Decline in Work Ethic**

The seventh trend that raises the need for character education focus in schools is what Lickona calls a decline in the work ethic. The importance of student engagement with school is recognized by educators, as is the observation that far too many students are bored, unmotivated, and uninvolved, that is, disengaged from the academic and social aspects of school life (Appleton et al., 2008). More than 20 years ago, researchers remarked that although attendance at high school was compulsory in the United States, engagement could not be legislated (Mosher & MacGowan, 1985).

### **Self-centeredness**

Lickona also names increasing self-centeredness, also known as narcissism, as another dangerous trend working throughout the educational system. Narcissistic inclinations tend to be perceived as more accepted socially (Jonason, Strosser, Kroll, Duineveld, & Baruffi, 2015). Radical individualism (Twenge, 2006) emphasizes one's own needs over those of anyone else's (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Self-gratification

becomes the order of the day as students harbor an attitude of “it’s all about me.”

Boklage (2013) lifted up concerns regarding an increasing individualistic culture which ultimately results in the decline in dedicated civic responsibility.

### **Declining Personal and Civic Responsibility**

Declining personal and civic responsibility leads students to the individualism (Boklage, 2013; Twenge, 2006) and self-centeredness cautioned by Lickona (1996). Beyerlein and Vaisey (2013) concur with this trend as significant declines in civic engagement were noted, particularly when related to a religious worldview. Ryle and Robinson (as cited in Beyerlein & Vaisey, 2013) suggested that individuals who hold an individualist or modernist worldview are not inclined to have a feeling of community by involving themselves with other people. Beyerlein and Vaisey (2013) state, “Their findings suggest that this decreased sense of community . . . linked to a lower degree of community involvement” (p. 387). This fostered the belief that one’s cultural view of the world might predispose them to increased civic responsibility.

### **Self-destructive Behaviors**

Lickona (1996) advises that children have exhibited self-destructive behaviors through premature sexual activity (Finer, 2010), suicide (Pena et al., 2012; Wu et al., 2004), ethical illiteracy (Krettenauer et al., 2006; Nucci, Krettenauer, & Narvaez, 2015), and substance abuse (Pena et al., 2012; Wu et al., 2004). Substance abuse has been directly linked to what Reed, Amaro, Matsumoto, and Kaysen (2009) call interpersonal victimization (El-Bassel et al., 2003). Kaysen, Neighbors, Martell, Fosses, and Larimer (2006) report that the risk of victimization is increased by substance abuse. Reed et al.

(2009) collected data that supports a significant concern that substance abuse can foster both physical and sexual violence (Hingson, Heeren, & Sakocs, 2002; Testa, Vanzile-Tamsen, & Livingston, 2004).

Lickona (1996) explained ethical illiteracy which includes ignorance of moral knowledge as basic as the Golden Rule and the tendency to engage in behaviors capable of injuring oneself or others without thinking it wrong. Krettenauer et al (2006) state, “. . . young children, despite their intrinsic understanding of moral rules, tend to attribute positive emotions to a wrongdoer who commits an immoral act in order to achieve a desired goal” (p. 490). Because the purpose of public schooling required that schools seek to improve both academic and character education, the troubling youth trends implicate the necessity of a character education focus in school (Benninga et al., 2006).

Former first lady and teacher Laura Bush said, “Reading and writing are not all we need to teach our children.” While supporting the use of character initiatives in school, Mrs. Bush went on to say, “Respect and responsibility are just as important, and we need to make sure we’re teaching our children to be responsible citizens who have good values and ethics” (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center [EPERC], 2004, p. 2). Bier and Berkowitz (2005) commented,

Some yearn for a return to an era of greater spirituality and religiosity. Still others believe that an education system fixated on drill-and-test processes is an inadequate, if not poor, education and are seeking to strengthen the ethical, social, and emotional development of children. (p. 2)

The current accountability culture that exists in our schools implies a requirement for an atmosphere that is conducive to teaching and learning. Character education offers the

opportunity for school to create such an environment in which virtuous interactions coupled with stellar instruction are the expectation and not an anomaly.

### **Problem Statement**

Character education in schools has been reported to support a safe school environment in which adults and students can embrace core ethical values such as respect, fairness, and responsibility, for example (Pala, 2011). It has the power to not only “cultivate minds [but] nurture hearts” as well (Pala, 2011, p. 26). The creation of a safe environment in which students and staff engage in critical discourse of ethical issues related character development can produce an atmosphere of human beings who feel better about themselves and their work. As a result, one cannot overlook the implications for improved student achievement that character education presents for those courageous enough to purposefully and intently engage its implementation in schools.

BOA Middle School is located in the Panther County Schools (PCS) district and has been in existence for over 50 years. The school was originally built as a junior high school and was nestled in a rural portion of Panther County. The school was a predominately majority school in which mainly White students attended; however, with the growing city population and companies expanding their organizations outside the city, the BOA community began to experience shifts in its demographics. This dynamic transferred over into what would later become BOA Middle School. Students that had not been accustomed to living in the same neighborhoods were now also attending school with one another. The middle school was met with new challenges as the BOA teaching and learning environment transitioned to one in which many students were not making

decisions that were conducive to their future personal and academic success. Students appeared to become more concerned with me, myself, and I in regards to their own development.

Twenge and Campbell (2009) submit “with each passing decade, more emphasis has been placed on the needs of the individual at the expense of those of the society” (p. 471). The authors go on to suggest toxic behaviors such as materialism, over-competitiveness, entitlement, appearance obsession, fame worship, and attention seeking have become parallel to increasing narcissism. Young adults regard moral fortitude as a matter of personal choice and argue that people are entitled to their own moral views (Smith, Christoffersen, Davidson, & Herzog, 2011). Kesebir and Kesebir (2012) state, “In the absence of a shared moral lexicon, confusion about moral issues seems a likely outcome, even if not outright moral depravity” (p. 478). These young adults permeate schools harboring this same attitude which inevitably plays out within the environment of the school. Staff felt that many students who had been achieving in their personal and academic development began to succumb to an increasingly toxic environment. This perception of moral decline was especially pronounced in the staff’s evaluations of their young people which made it easier for students to steal, fight, and participate in drug activity and other behaviors detrimental to them.

President Theodore Roosevelt stated, “To educate a man in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society.” In an editorial written in a March 2003 correspondence, Moorad Alexanian, theoretical physicist from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, hit the proverbial nail on the head, stating, “Our public schools

must be places of academic learning, but also where character building is an integral part of the curriculum” (Alexanian, 2003, p. 8A). Shields (2011) corroborates Alexanian’s sentiments and suggests, “The goal of education is not acquiring knowledge alone, but developing the dispositions to seek and use knowledge in effective and ethical ways” (p. 49). History has proven that academic excellence does not necessarily translate to knowing and doing the good in an effort to better oneself and society in general. Benninga, Berkowitz, Keuhn, and Smith (2006) believe “the purpose of public schooling requires that schools seek to improve both academic and character education” (p. 449). It is imperative that the adults connected to the educational well-being of students do not waiver in their efforts to create a dynamic in which the character and moral vicissitude of students are at the forefront. Implications for success are clear when an atmosphere that is conducive to teaching and learning exists.

On the verge of reconstitution by the state, BOA Middle’s situation, which included decreasing test scores, increasing incidents of disciplinary action, and increasing staff turnover, necessitated a major overhaul which began with naming a new principal in July, 2007. With the new administrator’s arrival came the push for a character education agenda throughout the school to create an environment that fostered good teaching and learning. Hunter (2008) questioned whether a supportive sociocultural environment had the ability to cultivate moral values and virtues within society anymore. A staple of this type of environment is a foundation grounded in morality and virtues concepts that comprise the essence of character—something he felt no longer existed.



Could implementation of an exemplary character education program from 2007 to 2010 offer the opportunity for BOA Middle to create such an environment in which virtuous interactions coupled with stellar instruction were the expectation and not an anomaly? Did implementing the program create conditions in the school for students to become more successful both personally and academically through exhibiting positive character traits? If it did, how can this phenomenon be experienced in schools across the PCS district and beyond. The ongoing response to creating school environments conducive to teaching and learning through character education must be met with understanding, specific strategies, and knowledge to experience the school improvement that is capable.

### **Purpose of the Study**

When introducing the new character education website erected by the United States Department of Education, former Secretary of Education Rod Paige remarked,

Sadly, we live in a culture without role models, where millions of students are taught the wrong values—or no values at all. This culture of callousness has led to a staggering achievement gap . . . crime, violence, teenage pregnancy, and tobacco and alcohol abuse. Good character is the product of good judgments made every day. (as cited in Benninga et al., 2006, p. 448)

This research is a qualitative interview study of the three-year implementation of an exemplary middle school character education program and its influence on school improvement at the school. The school that was identified for this study was selected because it is a source of rich qualitative data. Stakeholders in the school can provide both plentiful and diverse perspectives regarding the influence of the character education

program on the middle school during the three-year implementation process. The stakeholders for this study include (a) teachers, (b) school support staff, (c) administrators, and (d) parents.

BOA Middle School was selected for this study given my prior experience at the school. I served as the school principal at BOA for the duration of the BOA Character Program implementation. I began my tenure at BOA July 1, 2007 after being told that the school was a “hot bed.” When I inquired further, I was advised that the middle school had become a volatile atmosphere where students roamed the halls without permission, cursed out teachers, fought almost incessantly, and failed to meet minimum achievement goals. Teachers, on the other hand, were at their wits end often resorting to antagonistic interactions with students due to frustrations of the job coupled with seemingly unconcerned students whose parents were equally as frustrated.

### **Here Comes Character . . . Right Down Character Lane**

Upon meeting with staff, parents, and students the summer of 2007, I began to formalize ideas about what I felt could have the greatest influence on an already deteriorated learning environment and recalled workshops that resonated with me at character education conferences in which considerable improvements had been made at schools across the country. After convening with the BOA Leadership Team and my supervisor, we agreed that developing a character education program to address the significant issues BOA was facing could not hurt the lackluster teaching and learning environment at the school.

Implementing any major initiative in which there is a perceived potential for loss of instructional time brings with it the question of how students' academic performance will be impacted. The idea of instituting a character education program at BOA Middle was no different. As the new principal, I shared with my supervisors the thoughts I had about the potential outcomes that having a successful character education program at BOA could present. Considering the school's status at that time, there was really nothing that we could lose, but we had everything to gain in my opinion. I felt that it was my role to be what Miller (2012) called "the most optimistic cheerleader for his or her school despite what circumstances may suggest" (p. 714). It was easy for the school's stakeholders to point the finger of blame at others regarding why BOA was where it was at the time; however, putting that behind us and looking towards improving the conditions at the school became the most important task before us. I became an advocate for the character education program's implementation at BOA Middle and had the assistance of a stellar administrative team that believed in the power of the initiative as well.

Our administrative team developed our Character Education Team whose job it was to assist the administration with guiding the school staff in the program. This team consisted of highly-regarded teachers who were known for their ability to hold themselves and their students to high expectations. This characteristic, in addition to others, allowed for these teachers to act as the resident experts on how our program could be rolled out to the staff, students, and parents. The parents on the team also served as members of the BOA PTSA and were instrumental in encouraging the school's parent

base to support the character initiatives through their visibility at the school as well as providing leadership to parents in developing character in children. The team ultimately utilized the Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education (CEP, 2009) as a framework on which to build the BOA CE program.

### **The BOA Character Education Program**

The foundation of the program resided in four main character traits including respect, responsibility, integrity, and caring, and these traits would provide the umbrella character expectations for everyone in the school. Every school venue such the hallways, classrooms, offices, cafeteria, bathrooms, commons areas, and gym contained representations of expectations for staff and students that were aligned with the four character traits. As the school principal, I exercised considerable ownership in the program and encouraged the school community to do the same. I would appear on the BOA Morning Show each Monday morning to share with staff and students our character goals for the week based on our prior week's performance. Each Friday morning, I would report to staff and students how the administration felt the week had gone and if we had met our goals which could include reductions in discipline referrals, zeros for homework, failing class grades, and tardies and/or absences to class, to name a few. The morning show allowed me to share our school's progress with the school community each week. The same information was shared with parents as well through the phone system employed by the school district in the hopes of soliciting their support to investigate their children's contribution to the character building process.

The creation of the BOA Character Development Team provided additional assistance to staff and parents during the implementation process and became the resident cheerleaders for the program. The team created character expectation matrices that were posted throughout the school. One could not travel ten steps in the building without being presented with a visual representation of the expectations that were aligned with the program's four foundational traits. In addition, the Character Development Team developed character lessons from resources that had been obtained at professional development opportunities and other activities that addressed specific facets of the school environment. For example, if there had been an issue with students leaving trash on the cafeteria tables and floors, a character lesson regarding responsibility was developed which reiterated the staff and student's obligation to leave the cafeteria tidy and clean for the next class. Teachers delivered the lessons for each day in a 27-minute advisor/advisee period at the beginning of the school day after the attendance had been taken. Students had the opportunity to role play, empathize, and critically assess how they might handle various situations that might present themselves at any time whether in school or not.

Based on school community feedback, additional character lessons that aligned with the four character traits of the program were created to assist students and staff with embracing the four program character traits. Students were not only educated in ways to navigate specific circumstances, but their teachers were expected to represent the BOA Character Education Program by modeling the process to follow in situations. The administrative team that I led provided leadership for teachers and students as they were

versed in the foundations of our program and expected the best from our school community. As Miller (2012) states, “effective character education is not just about teaching character to students, it requires an equal focus on reminding the adults in the building what character means and to become an example of good character” (p. 711). As a result, students began to be able to explain what the program traits and corresponding expectations were in addition to why certain responses were appropriate and inappropriate based on the examples that were being set for them by school staff and their peers.

Parents who were part of the Character Development Team and BOA Leadership Team utilized parent meetings, ball games, curriculum nights, and other general body activities to reiterate the goals of the BOA Character Education Program. They willingly became active partners by assisting BOA Middle staff with instituting the program and welcoming other parents to join the effort. Students began to see their parents join forces with school staff in the hopes of improving a teaching and learning environment that had worsened over the years.

Parents and staff worked together to create opportunities for collaboration within the community through service learning activities. Students began food and clothes donation drives aimed at meeting needs within the school community. Staff used the efforts to engage the students in curricular discourse that would not only teach the curriculum but also provide the character backdrop that was necessary for students to think, feel, and do character-related activities.

June 30, 2010 marked my last day of service as the BOA Middle principal, but I have always held fond memories of my tenure there since my departure six years ago. The success our school experienced through our character education program implementation was amazing. During the three-year period from 2007 to 2010, BOA experienced a 65% reduction in its out of school suspensions, recorded its lowest teacher turnover rate—11%, was named a Panther County Schools (PCS) district Highly Enhanced School, met 29 of 29 academic targets, was named a North Carolina Positive Behavior Intervention Support Model School, experienced high growth as determined by student achievement data, and met federal accountability growth standards.

Given the troubling trends in today's youth substantiated by research (Dahlberg et al., 2005; Garofalo et al., 1998; Lickona, 1996; Pena et al., 2012), the purpose of this study is to investigate school stakeholder perceptions of the influence of character education program implementation in a middle school and its contribution to school improvement.

### **Research Questions**

In a profession that makes all others possible, many contend that we cannot afford not to have a character education focus in our schools (Berkowitz, 2011c; Lickona, 2009; M. Davidson et al., 2008a). To address the problem of an inadequate teaching and learning environment in middle school due to a poor or nonexistent character focus, the central research question for this study is:

- How did the three-year implementation of an exemplary middle school character education program contribute to school improvement at a middle school that was recognized for its exemplary character education program?

The following research questions will be investigated to assist with addressing the central question:

- How do adult stakeholders who participated in the implementation of an exemplary middle school character education program define character and character education and describe their significance?
- How do adult stakeholders who participated in the implementation of an exemplary middle school character education program explain the development of values and moral codes through the character education program?
- How do adult stakeholders who participated in the implementation of an exemplary middle school character education program construct the influence of the character education program on overall middle school culture and climate?
- How do adult stakeholders who participated in the implementation of an exemplary middle school character education program describe and critique the influence of the character education program on their own attitudes and practices and those of others?
- How do adult stakeholders who participated in the implementation of an exemplary middle school character education program appraise and critique



the principles, actions, or consequences that were essential to successes and obstacles in implementation?

Given the troubling trends in today's youth (Dahlberg et al., 2005; Garofalo et al., 1998; Lickona, 1996; Pena et al., 2012), this study investigated adult school stakeholder perceptions of the influence of character education implementation at BOA Middle School and its contribution to school improvement. BOA Middle School was selected as it presented a data-rich source for the purposes of the study and given my prior experience working at the school. Over a three-year period of character education program implementation, BOA Middle experienced reductions in its out-of-school suspensions by over 65%, increased staff attendance, reduced teacher turnover from 33% to 11%, was named a PCS district Highly Enhanced School, met 29 of 29 academic targets, was named a Positive Behavior Intervention Support Model School for the state due to its exemplary character education program, experienced high growth as determined by student achievement and state accountability data, and met federal accountability growth standards. Did the implementation of strategies aimed at instilling character in students create a foundation for school improvement through teaching and learning at BOA Middle?

### **Definition of Key Terms**

This section provides an overview of the terms associated with character and character education. It will depict the variability associated with these terms and provide subsequent direction for the reader throughout the remainder of this study.

*Character*—Goodman (2012) define character as “our essential identity, our distinctiveness (literally, that which makes us). It includes what we stand for, what we pursue and why, the reason for the choices we make” (p. 2).

*Character Education*—Character education as defined by M. M. Williams (2000) is “any deliberate approach by which school personnel, often in conjunction with parents and community members, . . . help children and youth become caring, principled, and responsible” (p. 32). Furthermore, Schwartz, Beatty, and Dachnowicz (2006) advise,

The term character education has become a catch all umbrella term that describes concerted efforts to teach a number of qualities including: civic virtue, respect, responsibility, social and emotional learning, empathy, caring, tolerance, honesty, and service to community. (p. 27)

*Character Education Program*—For this study the character education program is the plan used by school personnel in conjunction with other school stakeholders to help children and youth become caring, principled, and responsible. J. Leming (1997) suggested four critical facets of any character education program which include the following:

- exposure to behavioral examples of good character
- modeling of appropriate behavior by adults
- exploration of character education objectives through discussion
- encouragement of actions that exemplify good character

*Manners*—Jacobs (2006) attests that manners are a thin covering on the surface of the human personality that has many layers. One’s manners are the outward showing of the personality that is dependent on the occasion or people around whom an individual

might find him/herself. Manners depict the acceptable behaviors that society has prescribed, expects, and even demands as appropriate given certain circumstances. These superficial ways of being are transferred to individuals through training; however, the breadth of one's true self is not reflected through them.

*Manners and Character*—While manners manifest based on socially-accepted, outward actions predicated on the situation, Jacobs (2006) states the following about character:

Character is organized in the mind. It has a memory and never forgets. When the essence of the vital experience which is behavior is received in the mind and organized well so that the mind accepts that as its central direction, then it becomes character. (p. 8)

Character, then, “is the behavior that one has accepted in the very depths of his being, in the substance, and allowed to take root there. . . traits that constitute character are lasting and extremely resistant to change, regardless of the circumstance” (Jacobs, 2006, p. 4). Simply, Roach (2014) concedes, “Our character is much more than just what we try to display for others to see, it is who we are even when no one is watching” (p. 1).

*Morals*—Navran (2010) defines morals as values that one attributes to a system of beliefs that can be religious but could also be political as well. These values are derived from outside the individual either by way of divine inspiration or a human authority figure who is prominent in one's life.

*School culture*—School culture generally refers to the shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs, values and traditions that are embedded into every facet of the school (K. D. Peterson & Deal, 2011).

*School climate*—School climate refers to the quality and character of school life. School climate is based on patterns of students', parents', and school personnel's experience of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures (Center for Social and Emotional Education, 2010).

*Values*—Values refers to one's essential principles that are utilized to determine what is considered right, good, and just. These are those beliefs that comprise one's standards (Navran, 2010).

### **Summary**

This study intended to understand stakeholder perceptions regarding the influence of character education implementation over three years in a middle school and its contribution to school improvement. The study explored participants' thoughts about character and character education and their meanings to them. I gained an understanding of stakeholder perceptions of the character education program's influence on the following: the development of values and moral codes at BOA Middle School, the overall middle school culture and climate, participant attitudes and practices and those of others, and participant appraisals and critiques of successes and obstacles experienced during implementation.

Chapter II will reveal research and literature that are related to this study. Also included in this chapter are other researchers' definitions of character and character education in addition to a history of character education. Research and literature of those opposed to character education will also be reviewed. Lastly the chapter will provide a

case for character education and its inclusion within schools regardless of their geographical location.

Chapter III will describe the methodology used to collect and analyze the data associated with the study. The chapter will also provide the reader with a descriptive representation of the research setting and its relationship to the study. The criteria used to identify participants for the study will also be discussed as well as the solicitation approaches utilized to invite them to participation in the study. The chapter will also describe my subjectivity, trustworthiness, and positionality related to the study and how these items were maintained. Benefits and risks associated with the study will also be explained.

Chapter IV will provide the reader with the results and findings drawn from the study. Themes that emerged through the data analysis process will also be reported. Chapter V will summarize the study in accordance with the central research question and sub questions used to investigate stakeholder perceptions. The chapter will also include my recommendations and thoughts for future research as well as potential considerations for local and state boards of education regarding character education inclusion in all levels of schools regardless of school or school district size.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

#### **Introduction**

For more than 30 years, the United States has experienced significant increases regarding interest in character development initiatives, particularly in schools. As a result, programs such as Rachel's Challenge, CharacterPLUS, and Character.org, formerly known as the Character Education Partnership (CEP), have attempted to provide society with implementation strategies and additional materials aimed at cultivating positive character traits in humankind. Berkowitz and Bier (2007) embrace the importance of incorporating character strategies into daily routines; however, they also express the importance the character education community such as school staff, researchers, and curriculum developers understanding the whats and hows of character education. In other words, what is character education and its purpose and how does character education accomplish the goals conceived by the character community?

Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, and Smith (2006) implicate character education implementation in the improvement of students' behavioral and academic performance. While researchers may differ in their definitions of character and character education, the multifaceted benefits for children, schools, and communities are supported. M. Davidson et al. (2008a) declare, "Character education isn't just about helping kids get along; it is also about teaching them to work hard, develop their talents, and aspire to excellence in

every area of endeavor” (p. 373). The concerted efforts of various adults involved in children’s lives will assist them in developing character-related skills that permeate every facet of their lives.

Included in this chapter is a descriptive history of character education and concepts that have led to its development since before the twentieth century. In addition, I have included details of my own experience with character development delivered by my father. Lastly, the chapter contains the components of a successful character education program and its implications for school improvement as described by Thomas Lickona known as that Father of Character Education. No research on character education implementation and its influence on the development of human beings would be complete without mention of Thomas Lickona and Marvin Berkowitz, who has investigated what works in character education and development (Berkowitz, 2000, 2011b; Bier & Berkowitz, 2005).

### **What is Character Education?**

Berkowitz (2011b) proclaims, “There are many sayings that remind us how we tend to revisit old ideas. ‘Everything old is new again.’ ‘History repeats itself.’ ‘And the seasons, they go round and round . . .’ This is certainly true of character education” (p. 1). Character education is known by varied other names such as moral education, values education, virtues education, and ethics education, to name a few. For the purposes of this research, I will use the term character education which Lickona (2009) reports is grounded in the notion of “moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action” (p. 69). Character.org (2015) states,

Character education is an educational movement that supports the social, emotional, and ethical development of students. It is the proactive effort by schools, districts, and states to instill in students important core, ethical and performance values such as caring, honesty, diligence, fairness, fortitude, responsibility, and respect for self and others. Character education provides long-term solutions to moral, ethical, and academic issues that are of growing concern in our society and our schools. (Retrieved January 14, 2016)

M. Davidson et al. (2008a) submit that “Character isn’t just about doing the right thing in an ethical sense; it is also about doing our best work” (p. 373). The Character Education Partnership (CEP, 2009), now known as Character.org, proposes that character education “. . . helps solve behavioral problems and improve academic achievement” (p. 3).

Character education is not only concerned with solving behavioral issues that inevitably occur in schools, but it is also dedicated to facilitating the overall development of the whole child (Matula, 2004). Costley et al. (2012) suggest character education is able to produce a well-rounded child who has a strong moral compass that will develop the child’s mind, attitudes, and subsequent behaviors. Simply put, “Good character education is . . . good education” (CEP, 2009, p. 3).

Benninga et al. (2006) submit that “character education is the responsibility of adults . . . and is the duty of the older generation to form the character of the young through experiences affecting attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors” (p. 448). In essence, the adults involved in a child’s life are the first teachers of how the child should be. This is done through the family unit; however, Coble (2014) asserts that parents are spending less and less time with their children, particularly in religious worship and values teaching. This lack of involvement in the child’s life can lead to the engagement in unhealthy and destructive behaviors that derail the child’s future.



## **History of Character Education**

### **Before the 20th Century**

Viewing moral behavior as the route to divinity, early colonists placed great emphasis on transmitting the Bible's moral precepts accurately to all (Rousmaniere, Dehli, & Smith, 2013; Watz, 2011). Colonial schools emphasized values that were founded on scriptural doctrines. Some of the earliest colonial laws that compelled the establishment of schools had as their goal, not the transmission of academic knowledge, but rather the inculcation of moral values (McClellan, 1999). The Massachusetts School Act from 1647, also known as The Old Deluder Satan Act, states,

It being one chief object of that old deluder, Satan, to keep men from the knowledge of the Scriptures . . . so that at least the true sense and meaning of the original might be clouded and corrupted . . . and to the end that learning may not be buried in the grave of our forefathers, . . . It is therefore ordered that every township in this jurisdiction, after the Lord hath increased them to fifty households shall forthwith appoint one . . . to teach all such children as shall resort to him to write and read . . . And it is further ordered, that when any town shall increase to the number of one hundred families or householders, they shall set up a grammar school . . . (Kelly, 2010, p. 42)

The colonists believed that personal encounters with Scripture ensured individual salvation and ethical citizenship. As time progressed, the educational system transitioned from one founded in community and religion-based initiatives to one with a more secular hue (Setran, 2003). A question that grew out of this transition in the educational system was whether or not educators would be able to provide the moral teaching that the general public would embrace and accept and would teachers be able to model it effectively (Mulkey, 1997; Sanderse, 2013).

### **The 1900s–1950s**

The inception of the American educational system had at its core the deliberate and intentional moral development of children. William Hutchins (as cited in Field, 2012) devised the Children’s Morality Code which was aimed at teaching a set of core values that included “self-control, kindness, self-reliance, reliability, truth, good workmanship, teamwork, duty, sportsmanship, and good health” (p. 140). These core values were paramount to this code and were especially critical to cultivating obedience and Americanism. American philosopher John Dewey (as cited in Hansen, 2012) professed that a child’s moral character should be cultivated in an atmosphere that is naturally just and social. He equally felt that the school should provide the environment for its part in the child’s moral development. This influential educator believed the central purpose of the school was to develop students morally (Dewey, 2004; Hansen, 2012).

Following colonial America into 20th-century America, there were three significant periods of interest in moral education—the character education movement of the 1920s and 1930s, the values and moral education movement of the 1970s and 1980s, and, finally, the character education movement of the 1990s (J. Leming, 1997, p. 12). J. Leming (1997) describes the “Roaring Twenties” as a period characterized by flourishing technological advances, rising cultural migration and expansion, and disconcerting social and moral changes. Examples include divorces in the home, corruption in politics, personal gratification without regard for the good of everyone, media negativity, crime, and religious decline (Bouza, 2013). In response to these negative detractors to

education, schools began to incorporate school organizations or clubs into their daily operations. Although student clubs were created to give students an opportunity to practice good moral behavior as anticipated through peer influence, a major research undertaking in the 1920s found that character education programs had little impact on children and that stable character traits did not seem to exist. Through this research, Power, Higgins, and Kohlberg (1989) posited a “death blow” (p. 128) had been dealt to character education. McClellan (1999) cited the opposite, stating character education was simply transformed by the times and many character education school practices, such as homerooms, student clubs, and conduct/citizenship grades on report cards changed due to societal and educational shifts.

### **The 1950s–2000**

Paul Vitz (as cited in Afanasyeva, Boyko, Афанасьева, & Бойко, 2015) reported that rates of illegitimacy, divorce, unmarried couple households were a few of the detractors to the positive development of children during this period. A reported 310% increase occurred in the birth rates of unmarried women from 1950 to 1990. In a matter of only 40 years, over 1.1 million babies were born to unwed mothers, which was up from 150,000 initially in early 1990s (Vitz, 1999). Saluter (1992) advised four percent of the adult population was divorced in 1970; however, by 1992 over 11% were divorced and this represented a 266% increase in a short period of time. With over 50% of marriages in the United States alone ending in divorce, over one million children had been subjected to parental splits (Mammen, 2015; Vitz, 1999).

Consequently, the resultant single-parent families from the late 1950s to mid-1990s cultivated an increase in the number of children living in poverty from 4.3 to 8.6 million. Vitz (1999) argued that this unfortunate phenomenon adversely affects children their entire life which translates to less than desirable actions from the students from drug abuse (Krettenauer, 2006; Reed et al., 2009), suicide (Pena et al., 2012; Wu et al., 2004), promiscuity (Finer, 2010), and self-centeredness (Koolen, Poorthuis, & van Aken, 2012).

This span of time fostered two schools of thought regarding character development: (a) Kohlberg's theory of children's moral reasoning levels and (b) values clarification theory. Kohlberg (as cited in McLeod, 2013) developed the six levels of moral reasoning implied that children could progress through various stages of moral development as described by the following:

- Stage 1 in which a child's behavior is governed by consequences in the form of rewards or punishments
- Stage 2 in which a child's behavior is determined their own personal needs and those of others if there is a benefit to the child i.e. "I'll scratch your back and you scratch mine."
- Stage 3 in which the child recognizes that good behavior is a benefit to everyone and is mutually agreeable.
- Stage 4 in which the child realizes doing the right thing and respecting authority is their duty.

- Stage 5 in which the child feels, other than what is governed by the laws of the land, their good behavior is a personal decision guided by their own values and opinions, and
- Stage 6 in which the child's conscience is what governs their behavior in terms of what is appropriate.

Kohlberg felt that children, when given the opportunity to discuss their behavior within a given circumstance, could in fact graduate from one stage of development to another. As such, Kohlberg was more interested in the moral decision-making paths children employed rather than their moral development (Sanderse, 2013); however, implementation of Kohlberg's theoretical approach in schools presented issues. The subjectivity of the child's teacher determined the stage at which each child began. In addition, this teacher's determination could only be consistently applied to each child if they took the time to work with each one and knew the process fully. Another hurdle of this approach rose when parents disagreed with the stage designated for their child by the teacher.

Values clarification theory suggests that values are neither right nor wrong; each individual must decide for himself, based only on the criteria of his own needs and wishes, what is best for him in any given circumstance (Sanderse, 2013). This theory offers a linear approach to determining what a value actually is as described in Mulkey, 1997 as the following:

- The child must choose their value freely without the interference of moral indoctrination

- The child must choose from alternatives of their value
- The child must consider the consequences of their values choice based on the alternatives
- The child must cherish the value and hold it in high regard
- The child must uphold their value choices publicly
- The child must act on their values choice, and
- The child must make their value choice a consistent part of their life by repeatedly acting in accordance with it.

In short, this theory supported that the values one holds dear should be governed by their own body of personal experiences and nothing else.

According to Brimi (2009), Kilpatrick exposed a significant problem with this theory using an activity based on research reported by Lickona (2009). In the report, a teacher gave low-achieving, eighth-grade students an activity titled, “Twenty Things You Love To Do.” The teacher analyzed the results and found that there were four popular activities amongst these students—drugs, sex, drinking, and skipping school. Kilpatrick (as cited in Brimi, 2009) argued that based on this, “A value is essentially what you like or love to do” (p. 91). Of course this theory would not provide the eighth graders’ teacher any latitude to foster positive decision-making strategies in these students.

The *Character Education Curriculum* (Chicago Foundation for Education, 1985), created to develop responsible citizens in 1968, incorporated lessons for students specific to their grade levels through grade 5. The lessons provided students with age-appropriate scenarios with which they might be confronted. Students were then charged with

describing how they might handle the situation while incorporating critical thinking strategies. Actions, alternatives to their actions, and their corresponding consequences were all investigated while the students interacted with each other in small groups. The best course of action to deal with the scenario was then determined by the students. This process would allow for students to encourage one another to do the socially acceptable action as opposed to the teacher dictating what should be done, thereby cultivating more commitment since the outcome was a joint resolution of the student and their peers.

By 1996, the *Character Education Curriculum* (CFE, 1985) had been introduced into 60,000 classrooms across the United States. Evidence supporting character education in America's schools surfaced as it was reported that students were less likely to fight, steal, and call each other names. Conversely, students were more inclined to think about consequences of their actions and work better together (Mulkey, 1997). Local school districts evaluated the curriculum and reported that 74.3% of respondents would recommend the curriculum to other teachers. Another 65.7% of respondents reported that character education is effective and the use of the curriculum gained steam within the United States into the new millennium. As a result, an influx of other character education programs ensued such as *Building Decision Skills* by the Institute of Global Ethics, *Character Way* by the Ethics Resource Center, and the *Community of Caring* which is founded on five core character traits of caring, respect, responsibility, trust, and family. The use of these and other programs to incorporate character education in schools are grounded in the notion that there is no such thing as a value-free environment (Hybels et al., 2009; Wright et al., 2011).

### **Concepts in Character Education**

The following will offer a broad perspective of the terminology associated with character and character education. In addition, I will provide the definitions of each of these terms consistent with their use for this study.

#### **Character**

The derivation of character's meaning comes from the Greek word for character which was originally used to describe "a mark impressed upon a coin" (Homiak, 2011, n.p.). The etymology of character has been attributed to works produced by Aristotle and Plato and while there is no argument regarding the origination of character's meaning, there has been inconsistency in what should be regarded as character.

In earlier times, character was regarded as those traits that tend to set one person apart from another. It spoke to the distinction and uniqueness embodied by a human being. Today, one's individuality tends to merge character with personality (Homiak, 2011). So what are the specific qualities of a person that should be included to determine their character, particularly when one refers to someone as "having good character?" Huitt and Vessels (2003) suggest, "When a person is said to have character, it usually implies they have distinguishing moral qualities, moral virtues, and moral reasoning abilities" (p. 1). Stoppleworth (2001) advises that virtues, values, ethics, and morals are all linked to character; however, there is a difference. The Heartwood Institute (1992) provided a detailed distinctive analysis of these terms:

Virtue is defined as a good or admirable quality or property. Values are concepts and beliefs that direct an individual's behavior, and when held in common with others, shape a culture's ideals, customs, and institutions. Morals can be viewed



as both public and private. Public morality refers to a common societal core of universal concepts of beliefs and behaviors; private morality is more closely linked to an individual's religious or family beliefs. The word ethics refers to standards of moral obligation, which determine the difference between right and wrong; ethics involves a commitment to do what is thought to be right. (p. 26)

Within literature one may find the above-mentioned terms used interchangeably in character education discourse; however, character can be regarded as a seamless unification of each of them.

### **Character Education**

There are many viable reform models aimed at strategic improvement of schools' climate and culture. Character education is one such model that has been employed in schools all across the United States and abroad. This approach has grown out of the concern of failing academic climates in schools ripe with societal ills such as drugs, gangs, teen pregnancy, and suicide that have continually detracted from good teaching and learning (Rickermann, 2011). Federal No Child Left Behind legislation had at its roots the improvement of student achievement but also betterment of students' character (Johannessen, 2001). Character education is a broad term used to describe society's attempt to transmit and instill values from preceding to succeeding generations (Stopplesworth, 2001).

The Josephson Institute (2011) suggests character education is the teaching of common core values called the six pillars which are the following: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. The six pillars of character education describe what it means to cultivate positive virtues or qualities which include

the following virtues of qualities that include the following according to the Josephson Institute (2015):

- Integrity, which means that the “ethical person acts according to her beliefs, not according to expediency” (“Integrity,” para. 1).
- Diligence, which is the “moral obligation to do one’s best, to be diligent, reliable, careful, prepared and informed” (“Pursuit of Excellence,” para. 2).
- Accountable, which refers to one’s unwillingness to “shift blame or claim credit for the work of others. He recognizes the common complicity in the triumph of evil when nothing is done to stop it. He leads by example” (“Accountability,” para. 1).

These virtues and others emanate from continued positive actions and interactions leading to the formation of good habits regardless of the diverse backgrounds from which students come. A. Johnson (2001) explains that the trouble around diversity then is not just that people differ from one another. The trouble is produced by a world organized in ways that encourage people to use difference to include or exclude, reward or punish, credit or discredit, elevate or oppress, value or devalue, leave alone or harass. This can be particularly true in schools in which certain students are placed into higher level classes while others are not. Certain students are severely disciplined for certain behaviors in school while others receive minimal consequences. Proponents of character development submit that these negative outcomes can be curtailed and perhaps eliminated in some cases by a concerted effort within the school (Healea, 2006; Lickona, 2009).

Unfortunately, the society charged with educating our children could perpetuate the indifference that permeates school cultures with what Macedo (2006) calls “ingredients of poisonous pedagogy, including ‘scare’ tactics, lies, manipulation, and other means designed to get individuals to submit to the rule of law and to accept what has been presented as sacred” (p. 67). This dynamic might very well be the result of teacher’s efficacy (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Milson & Mehlig, 2002). When teachers do not feel equipped to “teach” character to students, it cultivates adherence to these mechanisms, which lead to the inequities that demolish the educational playing field for some while providing what A. Johnson (2001) deems an “unearned advantage” (p. 23). Neuwirth (2003) suggests if teachers have accurate cultural information about many different cultural and ethnic groups, “their histories and experiences” (Hanley, 2003, p. 265), they will be more successful at helping diverse students achieve and cultivate an appreciation for others consistent with the Golden Rule, which many religions support (U.S. Department of Education [USDE], 2005).

The potential for this achievement is not only reflected in the improvement of performance composites generated from standardized tests. It also yields increased attendance rates for students. Subsequent decreases in instances of suspensions and expulsions of students, particularly Black men, occur. Research shows Black males are disproportionately disciplined, more apt to face expulsions, and suspended longer and more frequently than White students (Butler, Robinson, & Walton, 2014; Morris, 2012). Teachers must be urged to acknowledge the differences that make each student unique and expose them to those multiple backgrounds from which our students come. This type

of teacher modeling promotes, whether teachers accept it or not, some form of values and even virtues (Rickermann, 2011; Stoppleworth, 2001). This sense of urgency in which character education modeling matters is akin to that relayed by Neuwirth (2003) in which she stated,

The more perspectives and experiences students are exposed to, the stronger is their ability to understand alternative interpretations of situations and events and to relate to people different from themselves. This is a crucial step in accepting and celebrating ethnic and cultural diversity. It enriches those who are being studied and those who are learning. (p. 276)

Zapata and Gallard (2007) share a similar sentiment advising that “all students do not enter the classroom on an equal footing based on prior knowledge and experience” (p. 984). In their article, “The Burden of Teaching Teachers,” D. Williams and Evans-Winters (2005) remind us that

... culturally responsive teaching has several dimensions, including a knowledge base in different cultures, the ability to convert that knowledge into the curriculum, and the ability to communicate in a learning community, which Lynch (2012) refers to as “a powerful metaphor in education.” (p. 81)

Administrators’ and teachers’ abilities to communicate within the learning community

provide a public space in which marginalized and silenced voices can respond to ignorant expressions rooted in privilege (Friend, 1993; Johnson, 2001); white supremacy, or other dominant ideologies (Davis, 2003; Lundy, 2003) ... the classroom is one of the few public spaces in which one can respond and be heard. (Boler, 2004, p. 4)

Because of its link to power and authority, Lynch (2012) posits the voice is a significant facet of community. Wink (2005) describes the role of silence, as a verb, in critical

pedagogy as follows, “Silencing is usually a quiet and insidious process. Sometimes those who are being silenced know it, and sometimes they don’t. Those who are doing the silencing rarely know it” (p. 58). Vincent (2006) offers a remedy for this along the lines of character development. He believes that restoring civility, and thus alleviating the silences in schools, occurs when the adults in the building charged with educating the students are willing to begin the character education message by first looking within themselves.

Could the very limited attention paid to developing student voice be attributed to a limited understanding of the ways that teachers silence, intentionally or not, the voices of their students (Lynch, 2012)? This type of direct or indirect marginalization has the potential of “making them [students] invisible and insignificant in mind, values, beliefs, and behaviors” (Amos, 2003, p. 294). Consequently, it is this silence that leads to the disengagement of students which begins to make a case for an aspect of education that has potential to level the playing field for all students—character development.

I recall my father, who was a 28-year veteran educator, reminiscing about the days when the positive character education message was actively instilled in children and staff within our schools. However, the onset of high stakes testing and accountability has forced the character message to take a back seat and lose its initial luster. These are the days in which the almighty test scores, meeting annual measurable objectives (AMOs), or meeting and/or exceeding growth triumph over what some may consider the insignificant intent at character related ventures in school districts throughout the United States. There are those who would argue that with the curricular demands on teachers and students,

character education does not have a place in a school's daily routine. Crossley (2012) states, "Many educators feel that since standards-based education is mandated, how will there be room to implement a new emphasis when the focus is currently placed on standards-based teaching and learning?" (p. 6).

Good character building education is not comprised of initiatives, programs, or here-today-gone-tomorrow gimmicks. Character education is a way of life for everyone who embraces it. When done with fidelity and intentionality, character education can improve academic achievement; reduce risk behaviors such as (e.g., drug use, violence, premarital sex), increase desirable behaviors (e.g., altruism), and improve social-emotional and pro-social competencies (e.g., socio-moral reasoning, problem-solving skills, and emotional competency; Bier & Berkowitz, 2005).

**Opposition to character education.** Alfie Kohn (2011) believes the character education message has been blurred through critic and proponent discourse in which the two factions appear to talk past each other. On one hand, there are those who take character education to be anything beyond academic curriculum that is utilized to assist students in becoming better people. Whereas others understand character education to be a specific style of moral training in which particular values are imparted to children by way of assumptions about children's nature and how they learn. Kohn believes there are basic questions that should be asked of character education programs:

- At what level are problems addressed?
- What is the underlying theory of human nature?

- Which values are to be promoted?
- How is learning thought to take place?

***What level are problems addressed?*** Lasley (1997) proposed character education as the most recent panacea for parenting deficiencies in the home. Schools became responsible for doing tasks that should have been accomplished by students' parents. Kohn (as cited in Etherington, 2014) believes this has led to a "fix the kids" mentality in which students apparently come to school already broken, and the adults are responsible for mending them. Etherington (2014) states, "On Kohn's account, it is like 'the teacher holding a mirror up to the student and saying, 'This is who you are, now stop it''" (p. 97). However, this ignores social psychologist studies that support children and adults alike are products of environments and situations in which we have found ourselves. The "fundamental attribution error" as described by social psychologists calls for classroom transformations as opposed to fixing children through a program.

***What is the underlying theory of human nature?*** Kohn (1997) contends the character education movement "seems to be driven by a stunningly dark view of children—and, for that matter, of people in general" (p. 432). Kilpatrick (1992) asserts a "comprehensive approach [to character education] is based on a somewhat dim view of human nature" (p. 96). Educators who subscribe to a less threatening view of human nature may be apprehensive about connecting to "an educational movement that is finally inseparable from the doctrine of original sin" (Kohn, 1996, p. 156).

***Which values are to be promoted?*** Believing that terms such as respect, responsibility, and citizenship are ultimately synonymous with uncritical deference to

authority, Kohn (1996) cites a question posed by a *New York Times Magazine* reader. The reader asked, “Do you suppose that if Germany had had character education at the time, it would have encouraged children to fight Nazism or to support it?” (Desmond, 1995, p. 14). Kohn agrees that everyone in schools should be haunted by this question, particularly if character education programs are being vehemently implemented. He goes on to share the consensus reached between educators who are teaching certain values may inevitably dissolve. He states, “Educators across the spectrum are concerned about excessive attention to self-interest and are committed to helping students transcend a preoccupation with their own needs. But how does this concern play out in practice?” (Kohn, 1996, p. 157). Through his statement Kohn is expressing his dismay with the inconsistency in which educators deliver the character education program. This leads to a divergent character approach and message for the presenter and the audience. Kohn (2011) contends mainstream character education is usually more about socializing children to accept status-quo values than to challenge them. He further advises, “We need to help children critically analyze the status quo in order to decide which institutions and traditions are worth keeping and which need to be changed” (Kohn, 2004, p. 189).

***How is learning thought to take place?*** According to Kohn, perhaps the most significant facet of character education is how the values are taught. Children are viewed as pitchers before a full fountain of knowledge in which they have character poured into them by their teachers. They become “objects to be manipulated rather than engaged” (Kohn, 1997, p. 433). Kohn describes the perpendicularity of this approach by those who



would do not subscribe to it within academia but who wholesale enlist it as a strategy to promote ethical development.

Lasley (1997) suggested that the school culture, inclusive of the staff, and teachers taught values by actions they portrayed than by what they said during a character lesson. He contended that children inherently learn more by what they see and less by what they hear. Values became more about the adults with whom the children worked which meant values were caught and practiced, not taught (Thompson, 2002). Kohn (1996) cited the reward system incorporated into character programs as a detractor. The children's good behavior was predicated on the reward they would receive; however, there was no commitment to maintain the behavior in the absence of the reward. This compensatory system leaves children devoid of the opportunity to "integrate desired actions into their own value structure" (p. 159).

John Dewey (as cited in Semetsky, 2014) used an analogous reference to describe the futility of teaching values without allowing for integration into a structure:

I am told that there is a swimming school in a certain city where youth are taught to swim without going into the water, being repeatedly drilled in the various movements which are necessary for swimming. When one of the young men so trained was asked what he did when he got into the water, he laconically replied, "Sunk." The story happens to be true; were it not, it would seem to be a fable made expressly for the purpose of typifying the ethical relationship of school to society. (p. 497)

Pandey (2005) appears to support Dewey and Kohn by asserting, "Children must be invited to reflect on complex issues to figure out for themselves what kind of person one ought to be . . . and how to proceed when two basic values seem to conflict" (p. 113).

James Hunter (2008) is another opponent of mainstream character education and refers to a revival of sorts for character's revitalization in society. He contends while character can and is displayed periodically in what he calls, "exemplary manifestations" (Hunter, 2008, p. xiii), it is often not seen within the larger public context. He also advised that any restoration of character within Americans would not occur in the near future. Hunter (2008) feels, "... the demise of character begins with the destruction of creeds, the convictions, and the 'god-terms' that made those creeds sacred to us and inviolable within us" (p. xiii). He suggests that American society has blinded itself with the idea that character and values within the society will be reinstated if we are willing to put in the work to make it happen. The values deficit he cites renders feelings of quick fixes aimed at turning the current diatribe in a more favorable position. He calls the end result "the reduction of moral exhortation into a peddling of sterile abstractions, weary platitudes, and empty maxims . . ." (p. xv.) With regard to Hunter's dismal forecast for a character revival, B. White (2015) writes, "From his [Hunter] perspective, if there ever was such a decisive moment, it occurred long ago, perhaps toward the end of the nineteenth century . . ." (p. 127). Hunter adamantly holds that strong family units, authoritative reverence, and a caring society are not found in today's world (Davis, 2006). Hunter (2008) closes his commentary on character stating,

We say we want a renewal of character in our day but we don't really know what we ask for. To have a renewal of character is to have a renewal of a creedal order that constrains, limits, binds, obligates, and compels. This price is too high for us to pay. We want character but without unyielding conviction; we want strong morality but without the emotional burden of guilt or shame; we want virtue but without particular moral justifications that invariably offend; we want good without having to name evil; we want decency without the authority to insist upon

it; we want moral community without any limitations to personal freedom. In short, we want what we cannot possibly have on the terms that we want it. (Hunter, 2008, p. xv)

## **The Case for Character Education in School Today**

### **Theories and Concepts**

Some of the main concepts related to character education are synonymous with the phrase moral or virtues education and may then be defined as one's concepts, reasoning, and actions which pertain to the welfare, rights, and fair treatment of persons (Nucci et al., 2015). Creating this environment within schools is done through the training of interpersonal, emotional, and moral skills (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004). The traditional approach to character education suggests that character is formed in large part through habitual behavior that eventually becomes internalized into virtues consistent with character (Benninga et al., 2006). Traditional social-emotional learning has relied on more behavioral models of learning and development and is largely dependent on classroom lessons that teach particular social and emotional skills. It is this same approach that has been most common in school-based character initiatives (Tappe, Galer-Unti, & Bailey, 1995). There are several authors who have written about components of character education or development; however, there are a few who stand out as forerunners in this vast chasm of school cultural and academic improvement. Thomas Lickona, a developmental psychologist and professor of education, provided a strong impetus supporting the implementation of character education in schools.

Known as the father of the character education movement in the United States, Dr. Tom Lickona along with other character education supporters established Eleven

Principles of Character Education which would become the basis of the Character Education Partnership's foundation for quality character development. The partnership, founded in 1993, is the nation's leading advocacy group for effective character education. The principles on which it is founded and indicators of an exemplary character education initiative are as follows:

Principle 1: The school community promotes core ethical and performance values as the foundation of good character.

Principle 2: The school defines "character" comprehensively to include thinking, feeling, and doing.

Principle 3: The school uses a comprehensive, intentional, and proactive approach to character development.

Principle 4: The school creates a caring community.

Principle 5: The school provides students with opportunities for moral action.

Principle 6: The school offers a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners, develops their character, and helps them to succeed.

Principle 7: The school fosters students' self-motivation.

Principle 8: The school staff is an ethical learning community that shares responsibility for character education and adheres to the same core values that guide the students.

Principle 9: The school fosters shares leadership and long-range support of the character education initiative.

Principle 10: The school engages families and community members as partners in the character-building effort.

Principle 11: The school regularly assesses its culture and climate, the functioning of its staff as character educators, and the extent to which its students manifest good character (CEP, 2009, pp. 2–23).

As Director of the Center of the 4th and 5th Rs at SUNY Cortland of New York, Lickona's center distributes articles on character education, sponsors an annual summer institute in character education, publishes a Fourth and Fifth Rs newsletter, and is building a network of "Fourth and Fifth Rs Schools" committed to teaching respect, responsibility and other core ethical values as the basis of good character. Lickona has appeared on national media outlets and is the recipient of Character Education Partnership's "Sandy Award" for Lifetime Achievement in Character Education.

Dr. Marvin Berkowitz, the inaugural Sanford N. McDonnell Endowed Professor of Character Education at the University of Missouri – St. Louis, has investigated what works in character education and development (Berkowitz, 1997, 2000, 2011b; Berkowitz & Grych, 1998; Bier & Berkowitz, 2005). He has done considerable research regarding the quality of a character education's implementation within a school and believes that it must be done with fidelity. This is directly related to the teacher's efficacy (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Milson et al., 2002) regarding the components of the initiative. Berkowitz has authored several books and over 70 book chapters, monographs, and journal articles (Berkowitz, 1997; Berkowitz & Grych, 1998) and contends that other factors governing the success of character education within the school include taking a comprehensive, multifaceted approach; student's bonding [or connectedness] to their school, effective leadership, and direct skill building (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Bier & Berkowitz, 2005).

Kevin Ryan has attempted to derive what character education is (Ryan et al., 2012). The founder and director emeritus of the Center for the Advancement of Ethics

and Character at Boston University, Ryan is a leading contemporary writer on character education from the traditional perspective and has always been extremely critical of what he calls a “character education bandwagon” (Ryan, 1996, p. 76). Ryan, a former high school English teacher, has written and/or edited over 20 books and over 100 articles (Ryan & Bohlin, 1999; Ryan & Cooper, 2012). He implies that character education should not be intended to stimulate moral development. In other words, it is not a ploy to create a political cover for imposing a particular cultural agenda; however, it should be endeavored to create flourishing educational practices that lead to moral growth for all involved.

### **Why Now?**

During the Second World War and the time of the Cold War the importance of character and moral growth was emphasized, causing character development to make a comeback in public schools. However, just as it seemed to be reconstructed, challenges were put into place to question the need of morals education. These challenges became more pronounced during the 1960s through the 1970s when moral lessons became of less importance in schools (Prestwich, 2004) and a greater emphasis was placed in vocational skills, because of *Sputnik* and the ensuing emphasis on science and technology (Kristjansson, 2002). Modern society demanded that students be skilled in contemporary workplace environments.

Another factor in the decline of character education occurred when instead of community, church, and home being a communal unit, each now had its own set of rules and standards, which differed from one another. As such, these units no longer existed in

conjunction with each other. Instead, all three became separate entities. As an emphasis on academics grew in all ages of schooling, the time and energy devoted to moral education became greatly reduced. Character education was eclipsed as problems, such as racism, became troublesome, and teachers gladly left the creating of moral citizens out of students to the responsibility of their families and churches (McClellan, 1999). In addition, a rise in teen criminal acts both in and out of school (Minchew, 2002) and the perception that irresponsible and destructive behavior is increasing (D. Williams, Yanchar, Jensen, & Lewis, 2003) prompted character education's propulsion to the forefront. Although schools ceased from explicitly teaching character development, there were a small number of prominent people from separate factions that fought for its revival leading us to the rekindling character education is experiencing present day.

Kesebir and Kesebir (2012) suggest that "social commentators from both sides of the political spectrum" (p. 471) have noted a decline in the moral fibers of the United States over the past decades (Bennett, 2001; Callahan, 2004). Communal values that once comprised the interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships in our society have shifted towards radical individualism (Twenge, 2006). More and more emphasis has been placed on the needs of the individual (Twenge & Campbell, 2009) and how s/he might sustain her/himself at the expense of everyone else around her/him. "Me, myself, and I" has become the popular sentiment as the individual has placed her/himself as an ultimate source of value (Brockmeyer et al., 2015) and this scenario plays out in our youth in schools.

### **Summary**

Watz (2011) cited a merging of several factors including educational consumerism, a lack of conflict negotiation, and lack of positive models that have cultivated an atmosphere that requires character in schools. Webber (2003) suggests that “many educators believe that character formulation should be the work of parents and many parents believe that character is something that should be taught within the curriculum at schools” (p. 151). Needless to say, research supports the significance of adult stakeholders’ roles in the development of positive character within students and the impact this can have on student achievement. Bulach (2002a, 2002b) support embedding character education within the whole school and curriculum and continues to agree that adult stakeholders within a child’s environment, “from bus drivers to teachers . . . model desirable traits” (p. 145).

Despite the transitions character education has undergone, research contends that it is critical to students’ success (M. Davidson et al., 2008b; Lickona, 2009; Prestwich, 2004). Consequently, educators are on the front lines of educational and societal stability and should embrace the potential for school improvement that character education can render. “Therefore, it is imperative that parents, schools . . . come together to determine the code of ethics the next generation will hand down to its children” (Prestwich, 2004, p. 149). M. Davidson et al. (2008a) posit, “character educators have argued that by helping to create a safe, caring, and orderly school environment, character education creates the conditions conducive to teaching and learning and in that indirect way fosters academic achievement” (p. 371). Educators are discovering that positive character education



lessons embedded in schools daily practices have the potential to improve the teaching and learning environment and lead to better academic performance for students (Adams, 2013). Marvin Berkowitz (as cited in Adams, 2013) states,

If kids come to schools where they feel valued, safe, and feel teachers have their best interests at heart . . . they commit themselves. They work harder, there are fewer distractions, and kids are more motivated. Of course, they learn more. (p. 7)

### Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 is a visual depiction of the conceptual framework for this study.

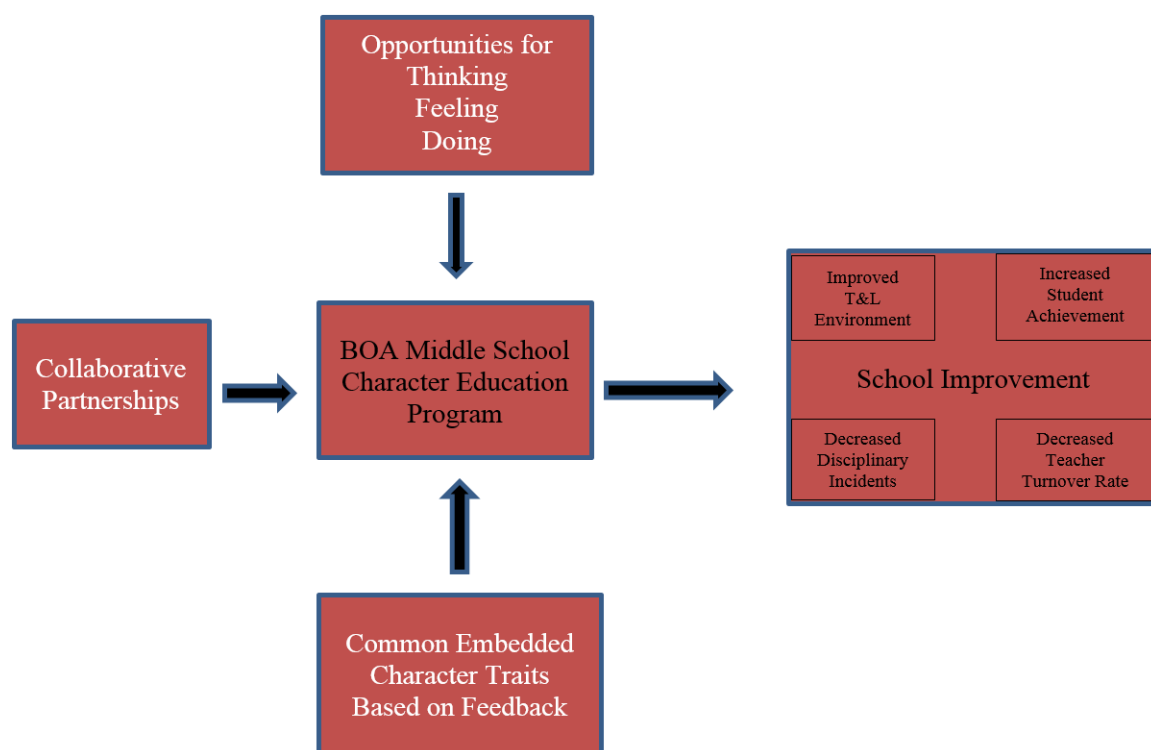


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: The BOA Middle School Character Education Program as it Relates to School Improvement.

In the center box is the BOA Middle Character Education Program. This exemplary character education program is at the heart of this study. Research from CEP (2009) advises that there are eleven principles that can facilitate the success of any character education program. The development of the BOA program was predicated on several of these principles that have been condensed for the purposes of this framework. The top box represents opportunities for thinking, feeling, and doing character-related activities that should accompany a program and its school community. Next you will see the box left of center containing collaborative partnerships that should be cultivated amongst parents, students, teachers, and other school staff. This represents another significant facet of any character education program. The box at the bottom contains common embedded character traits based on the school community's feedback. The development of a character program is not a cookie-cutter approach, but its design should address the current dynamic in a particular venue. Initial feedback is gathered to identify common foundational character traits that will comprise and guide the program and school community. The program should be assessed and modified as necessary based on feedback from the school community.

Once an understanding of the BOA Character Program is obtained, I will explore stakeholder perceptions regarding the influence of the program on school improvement represented by the far right box. The components of the program should lead to school improvement by fostering an environment in which the school community aligns its operations with the common foundational character traits of the program. This should reduce the number of disciplinary incidents occurring in the school and create an

environment that is more conducive to teaching and learning (T&L). An improved T&L environment should translate to a better work environment for school staff and consequently lead to increased student achievement.

### **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The intent of this study is to gather participants' thoughts regarding the three-year implementation of an exemplary character education program at a middle school and its contribution to school improvement at the school. I will describe the impact and extent of the character education program in one exemplary middle school in the Panther County School (PCS) district in North Carolina. The research will utilize an emergent design to capture the perceptions of various adult school stakeholders connected to the middle school in multiple capacities from parents to teachers, school support staff, and administrators. This chapter will provide the reader with a description of the research conditions including the setting, criteria, and manner in which study participants were selected for the study. This chapter will also describe the data collection process and the way in which data analysis was conducted. The risks and limitations of the study are also described in this chapter as well as the process in which the trustworthiness of the data was maintained.

#### **Research Design**

This study was a qualitative interview study. Studies of this sort are used to capture the insight of individuals who can provide relevant information regarding the subject matter. Emphasis was placed on investigating participant perceptions of an experience on implementing an exemplary character education program in a middle

school and in this regard, the study contains components of a phenomenological study. Collecting interview study perceptual data can be achieved by interviewing individually or as a small group (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1990). Lichtman (2010) suggests that qualitative research can be thought of as “a way of knowing in which researchers gather, organize, and interpret information obtained from humans using their eyes and ears as filters. It often involves in-depth interviews and/or observations of humans in natural and social settings” (p. 5). These natural settings are composed of varying levels of intricacy that the researcher analyzes to uncover meanings and connections. The goal of this type of research is “not necessarily to map and conquer the world but to sophisticate the beholding of it” (Stake, 1995, p. 23). In accordance with Stake, Krathwohl (1998) suggests the meaning of sophisticate to encompass the following:

- humanizing problems and data;
- making people, problems, and situations come alive
- portraying phenomena in context
- describing complex personal and interpersonal phenomena that would be impossible to portray with quantitative research’s single dimensional scales
- providing a holistic view of a phenomenon; and
- helping to attach emotions, feelings, and sometimes faces, situations, and context to the phenomena.

Woods (2006) states, “The qualitative researcher seeks to discover the meanings that participants attach to their behavior, how they interpret situations, and what their

perspectives are on particular issues” (p. 4). Merriam (1998) conveyed the following regarding qualitative research

the key concern in qualitative research understands the participants’ perspectives, not the researchers.’ This understanding is an end to itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of that setting, what their lives are like, what’s going on for them, what their meanings are, what the world looks like in that particular setting—and in the analysis to be able to communicate that faithfully to others who are interested in that setting . . . (p. 6)

Lunenburg and Irby (2008) reveal that document analysis can also be helpful to the research in the qualitative research approach. Reviewing documents related to the subject matter can be critically important in providing meaning and relevance to the investigation. In addition, Lichtman (2010) asks, “How do you select a case? I propose you consider one of three types of cases: The typical, the exemplary or model, or the unusual or unique” (p. 83). This study will focus on the perceptions of adult stakeholders during the three-year implementation of an exemplary character education program in a PCS district middle school in which they were involved and their thoughts regarding its influence on the school improvement that was experienced.

### **Research Setting**

The setting for this research was in a middle school in the Panther County School district. The PCS district is a large urban district located in the southeastern United States. BOA Middle School was selected as it presented a data-rich source for the purposes of the study and given my prior experience as an administrator at the school. Over a three-year period of character education program implementation, BOA Middle,

experienced reductions in its out-of-school suspensions by over 65%, reduced teacher turnover, was named a PCS district Highly Enhanced School, met each of over 28 academic targets, was named a Positive Behavior Intervention Support Model School for the state, experienced high growth as determined by student achievement and state accountability data, and met federal accountability growth standards.

### **Research Participants**

The participants in the research study were teachers, school support staff, administrators, and a parent who were employed at or had children who attended BOA Middle School during the three-year program implementation of the character education program from 2007 to 2010. Some of the participants were currently employed at the site or had children who currently attend the school. Other participants had transitioned to new positions outside the school; however, they were currently employed in educational roles. The participating parent still had school-aged children; however, they had transitioned to other schools both inside and outside of PCS school district.

The study intended to maintain a purposeful sampling of participants. Thirty adults who met the study criteria described above were invited to participate in the study. Solicitations for participation were made using various correspondence methods including email, telephone, and word of mouth (see Appendix A, B, & C). Securing all anticipated participants for the study proved to be a lofty goal as the research and participants' conflicting schedules prohibited several potential participants from engaging in the study. The adults who answered the solicitations to participate in the research study became the study participants. As participants agreed to become a part of the

research study, I followed up with the confirmed participant via the “Recruitment Follow Up Letter” (see Appendix D). Ultimately, 19 participants were involved in the research study. I spoke with each of the 19 participants to determine a consensual location, date, and time to complete the formal interview. Table 1 shows research participant demographical information.

Table 1

Research Participants

Participant Pseudonym	Position	Number of Years Involved in Character Education Implementation
Abigail Adams	Teacher	3
Allison Byrd	Support Staff	3
Angel Quick	Teacher	3
Brenda Bostic	Teacher	3
Cam Freeman	Teacher	2
Christian Carlson	Administrator	3
Caroline Hayes	Teacher	2
Elise Gray	Administrator	3
Jedi Warrior	Teacher	3
Jessica Spivey	Teacher	3
Karen Kohl	Parent	3
Lady T	Teacher	3
Lucas Keuchley	Teacher	3
Medina Maven	Support Staff	3
Michelle Marsh	Support Staff	3
Olivia Jones	Teacher	3
Vince Baker	Teacher	3
Winnie Uzzell	Support Staff	3
Zach Mergner	Support Staff	3

*Note.* Research Participant names are pseudonyms.



I explained the details of the study to each of the participants and addressed any questions that arose. In accordance with the approved Institutional Review Board directives, each participant received a “Consent to Act as a Human Participant” form (see Appendix E) for the study and was advised of their right to refuse participation in the study at any time. Each participant read, signed, and dated their consent form and submitted it to me before their involvement in the study.

### **Data Collection**

After approval for the research study was granted by the Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and the Panther County School district Office of Testing and Assessments (see Appendixes F & G), I contacted the current principal at BOA Middle. I requested permission from the principal to contact the current staff who met the criteria for the study via correspondence described earlier. Study participants who were no longer working at the school were contacted in the same fashion. The BOA principal provided approval to speak with potential participants after the nature of the study was explained in detail.

The data collection for this qualitative research study occurred by utilizing face to face interviews and document analysis. Employing diverse methods of data collection is critical to identifying corresponding strengths and weaknesses lacking overlap (R. B. Johnson & Christensen, 2007). Interviewing is a powerful technique for deriving information from participants as their findings are both trustworthy and accurate. Clews and Newman (2005) posited that learning from different groups of people was catalyzed by interviews. Fontana and Frey (2000) stated,

It seems that everyone, not just social researchers, relies on interviews as a source of information, with the assumption that interview results in telling true and accurate pictures of respondents. One cannot escape being interviewed; interviews are everywhere. (p. 646)

Interviews are used throughout research to determine peoples' opinions, perceptions, and reactions to varied occurrences. I hoped to cultivate and foster a sense of trust with the participants. These interviews provided an approach that was conducive to deriving the various themes that arose as a result of the dialogue. In addition, the potential existed for me to make the connections to the pertinent themes gleaned during the literature review.

Fontana and Frey (2000) advised that interviews can either be structured, unstructured, or open-ended. For the sake of this study, I asked each participant the same open-ended questions; however, I also used a semi-structured approach that provided opportunities to ask interviewees additional questions aimed at providing more clarity and depth of response. The particular order in which the questions were asked was determined by the responses rendered during the interviews. The interviews all had an approach that provided for the flexibility necessary to facilitate the emergence of data that might not have otherwise been obtained. The absence of structure during portions of the interviews provided a deeper insight into the participants' true feelings about the character education implementation process and its impact in the middle school setting and their lives in general.

The interview protocol (see Appendix H) included questions that were derived using the method described by Lunenburg and Irby (2008) sequenced as follows:

- factual, basic questions that got the interviewee involved were asked first while other factual questions were placed throughout the interview,
- any present, past, or future-based questions were asked in that appropriate order, and
- the interviewee was allowed to add additional information they deemed pertinent to the interview.

Document analysis, which Lunenburg and Irby (2008) suggest is “related to the critique or analysis of documents for significance, meaning, and relevance within a particular context and phenomenon” (p. 94), was utilized to reflect the impact, if any, that character education implementations had on the school’s culture and climate leading to the school’s improvement. I also used the document analysis to investigate the evolution of themes that might be supported or denied through the data collection process. The documents reviewed included but were not limited to aggregate school discipline profiles including in-school and out-of-school suspension data, aggregate teacher/student attendance data, historical papers, staff and parent emails, school celebration photos, and awards certificates earned during the three-year character education implementation process. Information that was not readily available at BOA Middle was requested by me at the district office. The proper review protocols were followed per the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and Panther County School district review board process.

I investigated adult stakeholder perceptions regarding character education program implementation and its contribution to the school’s improvement as a result. I convened in-depth interviews which mirrored a dialogue amongst professional

colleagues. Litchman (2010) asserts, “The purpose of in-depth interviews is to hear what the participant has to say in his own words, in his voice, with his language and narrative” (p. 143). The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to one hour. Eighteen interviews took place at either the participants’ or researcher’s place of business. One interview occurred at a mutually agreeable neutral site.

Each interview was digitally recorded while I took additional notes on paper (see Appendix I). The digital recordings allowed me to reflect the sentiments of the participants’ thoughts accurately and as told “in his own words . . .” (Litchman, 2010, p. 143). I transcribed the interview recordings following the interview sessions. This provided a chance for me to reflect critically on the study participants’ responses and begin the data analysis process.

### **Data Analysis**

Lichtman (2010) “sees [data] analysis as an ongoing process, not a linear process following the collection of data” (p. 193). This sentiment is shared by other researchers who suggest that both data collection and analysis should occur simultaneously (Merriam, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Creswell (1994) supported the idea that qualitative analysis be founded on the reduction of data and interpretation.

During data collection, the analysis of the data was ongoing. The interview recordings were transcribed and read repeatedly. While reading the transcripts, I coded various lines within the transcripts. In many cases successive lines were coded using adjectives, phrases, single words, or symbols. The purpose of this process was to identify similar codes that could be categorized to determine the existence of any thoughts that

might be identified as central themes of the study. I used a process described by Lichtman (2010) in which a large body of material such as interview text is dissected and categorized into codes. The same process was followed for subsequent interviews until all information has been coded.

The codes were then placed into a spreadsheet that contained pseudonyms for each of the research participants. A page and line number was used to designate which participant stated similar or the same codes for easier referencing as categories began to form. Participant statements that were similar and related to each other were categorized using the spreadsheet matrix. The relevant participant responses were categorized together to become the designated themes of the study. This process was significant as it was utilized to develop a description of adult stakeholder perceptions regarding the exemplary character education program and its implications for school improvement.

I internally validated the study data through the following ways:

1. Data Triangulation in which the data was derived through various means including interviews and analysis of a variety of school documents.
2. Member checking in which my interpretations were verified by having others look at the data and go through the same analysis process.
3. Peer review in which a colleague read the research data as did I and provided feedback. This provided a level of objectivity as the peer had not been involved in the research study directly.

### **Researcher's Subjectivity**

Peshkin (1988) defined subjectivity as a characteristic that affects the results of any investigation. Because one's subjectivity is related to his/her background in terms of social status, class, or beliefs system, subjectivity may very well change the landscape of a study. Lichtman (2010) asserts, "The qualitative researcher is aware of and sensitive to the way his or her own history shapes a study" (p. 122). Drapeau (2002) suggested making use of researcher subjectivity and drawing on one's own inner experiences in order to better understand the subject of a study. I, as described by friends, family, former teachers, and professors, have been described as someone who maintains good character.

As an African American male, I have always been advised by my immediate family that I must be twice as good as the next person beside me, particularly if the person is Caucasian. There were experiences instilled in me during my youth that spoke volumes about the advice that I had been given. On one specific occasion, I was approximately 13 years old walking in a department store with my mother. My mother and I later observed a Caucasian gentleman following us around the store as if to indicate his distrust with us. I specifically recall making eye contact with the gentleman who maintained eye contact with me while my mother continued shopping. At one point, I reminded my mother of the gentleman following us around the store at which time I truly became quite upset and asked to leave the department store. My mother did not allow me to leave the store and instructed me to remain quiet and by her side while she finished shopping. I recall my mother's words of wisdom on that day in which she encouraged

me to always show people the great person that I was in spite of how they might treat me. The golden rule, in which one is to treat someone as they desire to be treated, was the foundation of my mother's advice and has long remained engrained in my personality and part of who I am today. My religious background has also instilled in me the importance of maintaining positive character as though Jesus Christ were standing right beside me at any time. I feel that my awareness of my own subjectivity allowed me to pay closer attention to the sentiments of the study participants to ascertain their true perceptions of the stakeholders regarding the influence of the character education implementation without allowing my personal sentiments to affect the study data.

Given my experience throughout my personal and educational career, I became interested in the influence of character education in the middle school setting. The interest grew with time based on work done while the instructional leader at the BOA Middle School in the PCS district. My school was part of a study done by the United States Department of Education which was studying overarching effects of character education implementation in the middle school. BOA Middle was part of a study that included six middle schools in the district. I recognized the significance that character development had on the overall school culture and climate as determined by several pieces of school data; however, the perceptions of other adults connected to BOA Middle were never investigated. Discoveries as a result of this research can advise school communities on how to implement character education programs effectively in the hopes of creating or enhancing a teaching and learning environment in which priority is placed on the positive character development of students and staff in addition to their academic

improvement. My experience at BOA Middle presented the stimulus for this dissertation project.

### **Trustworthiness**

Thomas and Magilvy (2011) allude to the existence of specific conditions that should be considered when addressing the trustworthiness in a research study. The research findings must have the following: (a) truth-value, (b) applicability, (c) consistency, and (d) neutrality. Truth-value, also described as “credibility . . . allows others to recognize the experiences contained within the study through the interpretation of participants’ experiences” (p. 152). I determined and established the credibility of this study by reading each of the participants’ transcripts and identifying similarities within participants’ comments then coding and categorizing them from which emergent themes were determined. I also provided transcripts to each of the participants for them to provide their feedback and either confirm or deny the contents and researcher interpretations of their own data. This process is also known as member checking.

The applicability of the research, which Thomas and Magilvy (2011) term “transferability” addresses the reproducibility of similar results independent of the group or groups of participants that are investigated. In other words, transferability answers the question, “Can similar research findings be derived from a particular inquiry that is not directly related to the participant base or context initially explored?” For this research study, applicability was established by providing a description of the participants used for this study and their representative roles within the school which ranged from



administrators and teachers to support staff and parents who were involved with the school during the three-year character education implementation process.

The consistency or dependability of a study refers to the ability of a different researcher to be able to follow “the decision trail used by the [original] researcher” (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p. 153.) This study achieved this by employing the process stated in Thomas and Magilvy (2011) in which the researcher did the following: (a) described the specific purpose of the study, (b) discussed how the why the participants were selected for the study, (c) described how the data were collected and how long the data collection lasted, (d) explained how the data were reduced or transformed for analysis, (e) discussed the interpretation and presentation of the research findings, and (f) communicated the specific techniques used to determine the credibility of the data. One strategy used to accomplish dependability included peer review in which a colleague of mine was provided the research data and asked to provide their analysis of the data to corroborate my findings. In addition to peer review, I provided a detailed account of the research methods employed for the study which is supported by Thomas and Magilvy (2011).

Confirmability, also known as neutrality, “occurs when credibility, transferability, and dependability has been established . . . the qualitative researcher must be reflective, maintaining a sense of awareness and openness to the study and unfolding results” (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p. 154). This process requires that the researcher maintain a critically reflective attitude and recognize how his or her own preconceived notions about the study might impact the research findings. As such the researcher is encouraged to

“follow” the interview paths as opposed to “leading” the interviewee down the line of questioning. This is accomplished by the researcher clarifying participants’ responses and use of other jargon not readily understood by the study reader or research consumer. In addition, this cultivates confidence in the conduct credibility of the research and applicability of the study (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011).

### **Benefits**

The findings from the study will be used to fulfill requirements for my doctoral degree studies. Panther County School district administrators, teachers, support staff and parents can benefit from this study as a means of information the school system and assessing the adult stakeholder perceptions of the influence of the three-year character education implementation process at BOA Middle School and its contribution to the school’s improvement. The findings could also facilitate the development of a district-wide character handbook which could provide resources for school staff regarding strategies that can be used to incorporate character education and development into any school setting.

### **Risks**

Risks for study participants were minimal at best. Participants’ identities were confidentially maintained through the use of pseudonyms that were only known to me. Pseudonyms were also utilized to provide anonymity for the school and school district in which the study took place. I transcribed the study interviews and hard copies of the data were maintained in a locked file cabinet at my residence. Electronic copies of the data were maintained in a password protected thumb drive that was also locked away with the

study data. As an added security, my home was protected by a security system complete with cameras, motion detectors, and window and door sensors. Study documents will be destroyed after the required period for maintaining such research materials.

### **Limitations**

The purpose of this study was to determine adult stakeholder perceptions of the influence of the three-year implementation of a character education program and its contribution to school improvement in a middle school. The study shared the benefits of the implementation process as described by the research participants who were part of it. The participant thoughts may not substantiate the complete reason how BOA Middle School improvement during the implementation process.

The limitations and findings of this research study are only specific to one school located in one school district in the Southeastern part of the United States. The participants selected for this study only represent a small portion of the overall school community at the school described in the research setting. All participants in the study did not operate in the same role during the course of the implementation process and therefore, study results might not be generalizable for an entire school community, staff, or district.

### **Summary**

I used a qualitative interview study approach for this work. Prospective participants for the study were solicited through various correspondence methods which were discussed earlier in this chapter. Of the 30 participants that met the criteria for the study, nineteen participants committed to being included in this study. The interview

study approach allowed me to interact with research participants through individual, structured, semi-structured, and open ended interviews to gather their perceptual data. I also analyzed documents, including but were not limited to aggregate school discipline profiles including in-school and out-of-school suspension data, aggregate teacher/student attendance data, historical papers, staff and parent emails, school celebration photos, and awards certificates earned during the three-year exemplary character education program implementation process. These documents were analyzed to cross reference with study participant statements during the interview process to translate and derive the adult stakeholders' perceptions of the influence of the exemplary character education program implementation in the middle school and its contribution to school improvement.

Once the interviews occurred and were transcribed, I read each one and began to develop a matrix of common words and phrases that emerged from the participants' interviews. The data analysis revealed the experiences of the participants during the three-year implementation of the exemplary character education program. The analysis process provided rich perceptual data that addressed the research questions used to investigate this phenomenon.

Chapter IV will provide a detailed description of the experiences of the participants that emerged from the interviews and document analysis that presented the themes from the personal stories displayed through rich discourse. The first-hand experiences expressed in the chapter will deliver information that is both trustworthy and meaningful as I explore the participants' sentiments through their perceptions of the implementation of the exemplary character education program.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **RESULTS AND FINDINGS**

The intent of this study was to investigate adult stakeholder perceptions regarding the influence of character education implementation in a middle school and its contribution to school improvement. A qualitative interview study was utilized to explore perceptions of adult stakeholders during the three-year implementation of an exemplary character education program at a middle school in the southeastern region of the United States. In-depth analysis of the data is described in this chapter. Collected data were used to address the following central research question:

- How did the three-year implementation of an exemplary character education program contribute to school improvement at a middle school that was recognized for its exemplary character education program?

The following research questions were explored to create a description of stakeholder perceptions regarding the character education implementation at the school:

- How do adult stakeholders who participated in the implementation of an exemplary middle school character education program define character and character education and describe their significance?
- How do adult stakeholders who participated in the implementation of an exemplary middle school character education program explain the

development of values and moral codes through the character education program?

- How do adult stakeholders who participated in the implementation of an exemplary middle school character education program construct the influence of the character education program on overall middle school culture and climate?
- How do adult stakeholders who participated in the implementation of an exemplary middle school character education program describe and critique the influence of the character education program on their own attitudes and practices and those of others?
- How do adult stakeholders who participated in the implementation of an exemplary middle school character education program appraise and critique the principles, actions, and consequences that were essential to success and obstacles in implementation?

Data for these questions were collected and investigated through a series of face to face interviews and document analyses intended to detail adult stakeholder perceptions regarding the influence of character education program implementation in the middle school. The participants' perceptions were captured as a result of their involvement in the three-year implementation of the character education program. Aggregate school discipline records, including in-school and out-of-school suspension data, staff turnover data, and parent volunteer logs were reviewed to develop a snapshot of the impact of character education implementation during the three-year span.

Several themes emerged that addressed the central research question: How did the three-year implementation of an exemplary character education program contribute to school improvement at a middle school that was recognized for its exemplary character education program? The themes below were captured as a result of the participant interviews and document analysis coupled with member checking and data triangulation:

- Character is Multidimensional
- Character Education is 24/7/365
- Implementation requires consistency
- CE fosters school improvement as Adults Lead and Students Achieve
- School communities can support character education through Collaboration, Service Learning, and Reflection.

### **Character is Multidimensional**

In this section, I will describe participants' views on what character and character education is to them. The initial stages of this research study were intended to determine the participants' understandings of the ideas about character and character education. The participants were asked to provide their own definitions of character and later, character education, and what it meant to them. What follows are the participants' views about character.

#### **Character—It's What You Do . . . When No One is Watching**

Fairchild (2006) states that Germane defines character as "one's way of reacting to life situations . . . character is the sum total of one's ways of responding that have become fairly well established or set" (p. 5). Several participants related their definitions

of character specifically to what a person does, particularly when others are not around or looking at them. For example, Lucas Keuchley, a BOA teacher and coach, regarded character as a state of being when no one else is around or watching and implied that one must simply be themselves because it is the way they present themselves.

It is also the person one truly is inside and out and displays to others who one is. Angel Quick suggested that character is the way one behaves and one's true self. She felt that character is developed by one's moral values and beliefs but can also be developed by their interactions. A core content teacher, Brenda Bostic defined character as "doing the right thing regardless of who's watching or what reward you get." A school parent, Karen Kohl, and Social Studies teacher, Caroline Hayes both implied that their children have always been taught that they are expected to do what is right whether anyone is around them or not. People do the right thing simply because they feel it is the right thing to do. Social studies teacher, Abigail Adams did not care what events were going on around but was adamant that one's character should be consistent. In other words, the same way you are when one is around others is the same he or she should be when they are alone. One may believe based on Ms. Adams sentiment that an implication can be made that she is referring to someone's character being consistently good. Lady T reinforced her definition of character stating that a person's character should be exhibited in a respectable and responsible manner. Zach Mergner stated,

I'd say character is consistency in thought and action especially when people aren't looking. Doing right things when it's not easy or popular. It's a mindset you know what you believe are things that are significant and putting those things first and making sure that you put keep those things first. It's knowing foundationally, what's significant and building up around those things.



### **Character—It's How You See Me**

Former math teacher turned math specialist, Allison Boyd, regarded character as a sum total of one's attitude and how he or she wants to be perceived by those around them. She replied,

Character is what is spoken, what is acted out, as well as even down to work ethic. It is more than just a one-time one thing. It's your whole being. It is how you represent yourself . . .

Medina Maven explained that character involves someone showing their best self to people, especially those who are outside of their inner circle. She felt the way that people see someone is important and that people should always represent themselves in the best way possible. Individuals typically want others to view them in a positive light even when they are dealing with an unfavorable circumstance. In a sense this preserves their image in the eyes of their peers and provides a foundation for the ways others view them. Now a PCS district-level employee, Olivia Jones shared that this foundation has to be maintained, particularly “in the heat of the moment” because people generally do not wish to be thought of as being a bad person.

Dave Weber, who travels across the country and abroad speaking about his book titled *Sticks and Stones Exposed: The Power of Our Words*, often refers to a person called, The Me Others See. The character definition held by some participants implies that how one is when he or she is alone is not as important as how he or she is when they are in the presence of others. Cam Freeman served as an elective teacher during the three-year implementation process. She felt that character should be considered as a

person's innermost quality but warned that one's character can be changed based on whom he is around. While participant insight suggests the importance of having good character regardless of a situation, others referred to the potential for one's circumstances determine their character.

### **Character—It's Situational**

Study participants shared their thoughts about the character of a person being determined by a situation in which they are found. School counselor, Winnie Uzzell, suggested that character involves the way someone presents themselves in different situations and likened character to “a moral compass to some degree . . .” Others felt that this situational type of character can be considered an opportunity to cultivate a character reflection in students when embraced in the classroom. Vince Baker, a former BOA Middle English teacher, spoke about his use of texts in the classroom to provide students with a chance to reflect on how they might respond to a given situation. He stated,

Some of what I tell kids about character when we read a story or talk about a biography or individuals is it's their opportunity to respond within a position in which you are put in to your surroundings or to your peers or whoever else is around you. There are positive and negative ways to respond and there are positive and negative ways to reflect about how you responded. And the more often you respond in a positive way, the better the outcome and the better the relationships that are built.

The reflections that are afforded through incorporating character discussions in the class curriculum can yield substantial benefits for students and staff. Harsh and disrespectful impulsive actions can potentially be curtailed as students and staff members begin to consider the implications of their actions. The guiding question becomes “Is

what I am about to do or say going to cause a helpful or hurtful consequence?” Through the reflective process school stakeholders might have the opportunity to change an otherwise detrimental response to one in which a positive relationship can be cultivated and positive character traits reinforced. Christian Carlson, one of the school’s administrators, shared his thoughts that encapsulated other participants’ definitions of character. He indicated,

People are always saying character is a program that schools implement, but I beg to differ. Character is always occurring whether we want it to or not and when we want it to or not. Good, bad, or indifferent, character is always around and is an indication of who a person truly is. It can be sometimes be a direct result of a person’s circumstances at a given time, but I believe that my character has to remain positive no matter what my situation is. My character requires me to be an example regardless of what I am dealing with at the time. As a matter of fact, I’ve got to be an example for myself even if I do feel like acting a little bit unseemly because some folks will try to take you there. You know what I mean? As an administrator, my character has the potential to derail the success of a school community so you better believe I put on a happy face like the song says despite what might be going on at the time. I never want a teacher, a student, or a parent to be a worse person because of some derogatory characteristic they saw in me. I know that’s a tall order, but I guess that’s why I make ‘the big bucks’ like folks say. Ha!

## **Summary**

The multidimensional aspects of character were described by the participants in the study. Character is represented by the person that one portrays to others but can be altered given specific circumstances. It is the innermost quality of a person that presents itself when others are not within the vicinity. One’s character should ground his or her personality in what is deemed right to do without the promise of reward or recognition. It is the thinking, feeling, and doing of life that enhances a person’s experiences as they

interact and navigate within society. The multifaceted nature of character, however, presents great difficulty when attempting to provide a single definition that encapsulates a complete meaning.

### **Character Education is 24/7/365**

Given their definitions of character, the study participants were asked to convey their definition of the phrase “character education.” Schwartz et al. (2006) said,

The term character education has become a catch all umbrella term that describes concerted efforts to teach a number of qualities including: civic virtue, respect, responsibility, social and emotional learning, empathy, caring, tolerance, honesty, and service to community. (p. 27)

It is this definition to which many participants’ sentiments aligned while others referred to the significance of teaching and more importantly modeling what was expected within the school.

### **Character Education is Overarching**

Lady T described character education as an implementation of good character principles that would include respectful, responsible actions immersed within the curriculum of the school setting. Positive implications for the social and emotional well-being of children can be expected through a school having a character education focus. Character education (CE) has the ability to give a school community hope and promise to the potential for their lives from a different point of view than what they might experience elsewhere. Zach Mergner supported this statement suggesting, “character education is truly what is important and realistically these are the kinds of things that you should take out of the school and take with you wherever you go as well.” He supported

challenging students to think through how to act upon things that inevitably occur in schools that might appear to be to their disadvantage saying, “I think that’s what a huge fulfillment of character education is . . . first inspiring then identifying and understanding how to apply those positive foundational pieces of your being whether in the school setting or outside of it.”

Winnie attributed character education to being an exhaustive trait regime that provides students with the abilities to be success not only academically but also in life as well. It has the capacity to cultivate the social and job skills necessary for lifelong relationships and personal sustainability; however, it can actively provide the foundation for helping students develop a moral compass that serves as a guide that can effectively direct children as they navigate the winding roads of life. This guidance does not just happen by chance. It comes from those with which children interact regularly and provides the impetus for the school staff to ensure they are exhibiting how they would want students and their colleagues to do business.

### **Character Education . . . Modeling Matters**

Do as I say not as I do. I can do this because I’m grown. You are a child, but I am the adult. No doubt, these phrases represent only a few of those that have been heard by countless students in their homes, schools, and other locations. People sometimes use these phrases to justify their wrongdoings or inappropriate interactions with others, particularly when they did not yield to the reflective process of their actions prior to doing it. Regardless of what students experience in their home environments, the adults associated with schooling, including teachers, principals, custodians, and cafeteria

workers, must stand at the ready to provide students with a stellar example indicative of positive character and thus, the good education that is character education. Simply stated, modeling matters.

Jessica Spivey, an English and math teacher, asserted her belief that the most effective procedure for cultivating the character in youngsters is to model the desired character traits while students are in the school. A critically important facet of the character education program in a school must be the agreement of the school staff, with student input, upon which the foundation of the program will be based. The uniqueness of a particular school's character program will be predicated on the character traits the survey of the school stakeholders raises as the most significant to school improvement. For BOA Middle, the school elected to ground the implementation of its character education program in respect for oneself and others, responsibility in and for their actions, integrity in their decision making, and caring for their school and community through exhibiting school pride. Zach Mergner, a school support staff member, said, "... it's about helping students or whoever understand what those foundation traits should be, especially like in a school setting you're talking about setting up standards for a school." Cam reflected on the first few weeks of each school year and how they were spent with staff providing students with the foundational character traits for its program. Everyone within the school was expected to model the expected traits for students and each other. In addition, staff members worked together to hold each other accountable for modeling appropriately.

As difficult as it might have been, no one was allowed to assume the children already knew what was expected of them when each school year began. Vince said, “It’s about an attitude you take toward teaching each other and kids.” The message of respectful interactions was heralded by Jedi Warrior who recalled, “teachers were trained you don’t think about what greeting a kid at the door means to them. We stood at doors and greeted children. We did character, taught character; we taught what we wanted to see and modeled it.” Vince recalled a character education seminar he had attended with other BOA teachers in which the presenter described character education as treating kids just like he liked to be treated. The presenter shook every teacher’s hand that came into the session while looking them in their eyes—a tacit display of his respect for each of them. The atmosphere of respect was instilled in the attendees by eye contact, a smile, and a simple handshake. Vince and other BOA teachers immediately began using this simple yet effective method of modeling for BOA students.

Social studies and language arts teacher, Brenda Bostic and Michelle, a support staffer, shared the importance of modeling beginning with the adults and them living and being the type of person that was expected of the students. Modeling good character suggested that an individual was committed to contemplating their actions; anticipating the consequences of their actions; and exhibiting the character traits consistent with the BOA Middle message. When the adults charged with educating the children uncovered flaws in their own character, it provided an opportunity for introspection and a challenge to be better than he was yesterday. The teacher’s role of disciplinarian became secondary to a belief that everyone could do and be better beginning with them.

### **Character Education . . . The Mirror**

Mr. Carlson alluded to the framework that character education laid for school staff to introspect regularly—a process that had been lacking at BOA prior to implementing the program. He recalled stories of staff members who seemed to resort to condescending attitudes with students which stressed the learning environment in the school. The administration wanted staff to respect children regardless of how upset they became, but the school environment that preceded the program had become notorious for staff making negative comments to students and each other.

The implementation of the BOA character education program forced staff to consider whether their actions were suitable for other parents' children if they were not suitable for their own family members. Elise believed that character education included teaching staff, students, parents, and the whole school community, how BOA would change its operations. Instead of saying what would be done, the BOA community would begin to model what should be done so that Panther Pride would shine throughout each conversation, interaction, classroom, and office. Karen, a BOA parent, spoke volumes about modeling behaviors for students remarking,

I think the way you talk to a student . . . the way you talk to them and internally you might be saying, 'I wanna yell at this kid!' Just take a minute to know that kid because you're showing him how he should handle a situation. You're showing character all the time. Whether you're a teacher, administrator, parent . . . you're showing your character 24/7. No one wants to go to school as a student and the first thing they see is a teacher just not wanting to teach that day because they had a bad night or something happened. Uhhh no . . . say good morning to your students. Let 'em know you're glad to see them. I'm ok with the honesty of saying, 'I had a rough night with my family, and I'd appreciate a little patience today.' I know the kids would work with a teacher if they did that.



The onset of the character education implementation yielded conditions that were more conducive to staff members feeling comfortable enough to begin a dialogue with one another regarding the best practices that would help to cultivate a positive character atmosphere within the school and abroad.

The Character Education Partnership (2009) contends, “good character education is simply good education. It helps solve behavioral problems and improve academic achievement” (p. 3). M. Davidson et al. (2008a) agree that “character education isn’t just about doing the right thing in an ethical sense, it is also about doing our best work” (p. 373). Christian Carlson described a conversation with Tim, a seventh grader at BOA Middle,

I said, “Son, you already got two strikes against you. You’re black and you’re male. You can’t afford to give society another strike against you because you’ll either find yourself locked up or six feet under. I’m sorry, but those are your two options. Which one do you want?” I said, “You’re a good dude, man, but you have got to start doing more than just being good. Stop being lazy and do your work! I hope you don’t think I’m gonna be paying your rent and buying your gas and putting food on your table 15, 20 years from now. You expect me to do that? I can’t accept what you’re giving me in your classes right now cause that’s not your best, and I refuse to accept anything less than your best!” He looked at me like I was crazy and then said, “Alright, Mr. C, I got you.” That kid went on to high school and college and is now on his way to becoming a doctor. That boy’s momma was so happy for him and thanked me for pushing her son that way I did. Truthfully though, it wasn’t just me. All his teachers pushed him because we believe in greater things for this kid. For me, that’s why character education is so important. I might not be around to see how his life ends up, but I feel like me pushing him to do his best, on top of being good, was a turning point for him and it finally clicked for him. I’m feeling like a proud poppa all over again now.

There was a feeling that the efforts of the staff at BOA had positioned Tim for greater academic and personal achievement. That sentiment was referenced by participants who

believed that character education was about helping students to build character within themselves regardless of how the staff member may have felt mistreated by a student. Everyday presented new opportunities for staff to rally around its children and be an example of what was expected. This “deliberate effort to cultivate virtue” (Lickona, as cited in Prestwich, 2004, p. 140) is paramount to the success of any character education program.

### **Summary**

Character education is founded on the belief that there is a correct way of being regardless of circumstances. A misconception of character education is perpetuated by a belief that it is confined to a program or initiative that begins and ends. From this study emerged an understanding that character education is always occurring and at its cornerstone is modeling. Character education is being taught whether a book is ever opened in a school. Interactions with one another in which one is treated the way he or she wants to be treated is at the foundation of good character education. It has the power to transform a school community, but there are certain aspects that must be maintained, most namely consistent implementation based on common foundational character traits.

### **Implementation Requires Consistency**

The purpose of the research study was to investigate adult stakeholder perceptions of the influence of CE program implementation in a middle school and its contribution to school improvement. During the data analysis process, participants revealed their thoughts regarding: How do adult stakeholders who participated in the implementation

of an exemplary middle school character education program explain the development of values and moral codes through the character education program?

### **Character-based Message Modeled**

Realizing that BOA was not performing at an acceptable prosocial and academic standard, the new principal and leadership team surveyed the school community to assess the school dynamics. Based on this feedback, the team grounded its character education program in the following four character traits:

- Respect for oneself and others,
- Responsibility in and for their actions,
- Integrity in their decision making, and
- Caring for their school and community through exhibiting school pride.

These four character traits were the values hook on which BOA would hang all operations and interactions within the school. The development of values and moral codes at BOA was explained to staff through the CE Team that consisted of highly regarded teachers, administrators, parents, and a few students who served as character champions. The team worked to maintain optimism in the school and serve as resources to their colleagues and classmates during the implementation process.

Staff members recalled the seemingly countless hours spent explaining to their students not only the values that BOA would embrace but how the entire school would embrace them together. Each day during the advisor/advisee (AA) period teachers at BOA Middle taught character development lessons aimed at reiterating and reinforcing expectations for themselves and their students. BOA parent, Karen Kohl, commented

about the multiple times her child came home talking about hearing and seeing the same thing happening everywhere in the school. She stated, “It seemed like every day Jimmy was coming home talking about how his teachers told him and his friends that they expecting them to be great today, why? . . . because we’re a school of character!”

The “Panther Pledge” was recited by students and staff every morning before school began. The pledge served as a consistent coaching mantra in which the entire school community bonded together in unison and declared with conviction who they would be as a school. Jedi Warrior, an Activities Director, said,

When we stood up to say that pledge, it was like Jesus himself was standing in front of us listening. I will be a Panther of character. I will be worthy of trust. I will be respectful and responsible doing what I must. I will always act with fairness. I will show that I care. I will be a good citizen and always do my share.

Reciting the pledge together helped to set the tone for the remainder of the school day.

Data regarding problematic student and staff behaviors were discussed in weekly administrative team meetings. Based on the feedback, the CE team developed character lessons for teachers and student leaders to deliver during daily 26-minute advisor/advisee meetings. Staff also used character education traits that were part of the PCS district’s character development plan as resources to show the commonality between the BOA and PCS initiatives.

The lesson provided opportunities for teachers and students to role play, model, and discuss the character-based values on which BOA founded its program. The school’s philosophy became consistent with modeling the expectations that exhibited the four character traits of the program. Brenda implied the importance of instilling in students

the traits BOA reiterated because of students' varied backgrounds and not knowing the values that they were bringing from elsewhere. Karen Kohl described the zeal her son exhibited when he shared what he was learning in his AA classes about his character. "It was like he was the coach in our family always telling our other kids about how they should be if he saw them getting out of line. My job as a parent got easier during that time. Whew!"

Teachers not only used the character lessons in the school, but they also used them outside the school at recruitment functions at feeder elementary schools and at church youth group meetings. The BOA community's awareness of the CE program grew as school staff modeled the character traits out in the community and solicited its support for the initiatives. The character lessons afforded easier access to the foundation on which BOA based its academic and prosocial operations. The four traits did not apply only in the classroom, but they also were to be maintained when dealing with cafeteria workers, custodians, and office personnel—everywhere.

The school principal made weekly appearances on the school morning show to report his observations of how the school was doing and the message was always the same—BOA was a school of character.

I do remember the slogans that we had being in emails, in vision statements. They were on any agenda or paperwork that we had. I still have a polo shirt that had our Panther Character motto on it. It was just a reminder of the larger attitude that this is how we are going to do it. Our principal would, you know, in announcements; in staff meetings convey that slogan. It became a part of who we were and how we talked to people, kids, and each other. It was a constant reminder of the larger vision and how our school culture changed. (Vince, Teacher)

Kritjansson (2014) states, “. . . teaching character and resilience should be an essential part of every school’s ambition . . . they are vital components of a [well] rounded education . . . instilling them in young people should not be left to chance” (p. 3). It is the direct instruction that Brooks and Kann (1993) suggest, “. . . builds a foundation for more advanced learning infused throughout the general curriculum” and is “. . . necessary for infusion to be focused and effective” (p. 20).

### **Embedded Positive Language**

Utilizing language denoting positivity as opposed to negativity during adult-student interactions created school routines in which the school community operated effectively and efficiently. Prior to implementing the CE program, conversations amongst students and staff were not conducive to forging the positive relationships necessary for each other’s growth and success. Negativity became a cancer within the school as teachers were frustrated with what had become a deteriorated teaching and learning atmosphere in which an “us against them” mentality was the norm. Teachers began to consider their interactions with each other and BOA students. If their actions were not consistent with the four character traits of the BOA model, they had to work to be better.

Brooks and Kann (1993) suggest, “Students must know what is expected of them if they are to practice . . . Therefore, common negative language such as ‘Don’t be late’ or ‘Don’t forget your pencil’ should be translated into explicit positive language as in ‘Be on time’ or ‘Be prepared’” (p. 20). The conscious effort of BOA staff members to express expectations and their frustrations through positively communicating with

students generated the environment in which more positive relationships were cultivated with students. This provided the avenue to build character within the middle school students but also in the school staff as well. Angel Quick remarked about the importance of teachers taking the time to think about what they said and how they said it to students and each other. She said, “You know we can be some hurtful folks sometime, but when we realized that we jumped off the deep end and lost it, we needed to get it right with each other and move on.”

Constant attention was paid to speaking to one another in more positive tones and ways. This did not negate the conversations that did have to occur regarding negative situations on campus at times; however, the staff began to employ a different approach when conversing with parents and students. Brenda referred to the BOA staff using a four to one approach:

We talked about, as a staff you know, about the four to one. Even though some of us balked at the silliness of putting a number to it; essentially it means saying more positive language to students and parents versus negative corrective language. It is four positives to one negative. If you have constantly negative conversations with kids you will probably receive negative energy from them, but if you focus on developing positive dialogues and relationships with them then that should solve a lot of problems. (Brenda, Teacher)

The impact of this method was felt immediately by participants as they reported feeling more positive about themselves because the negativity to which they had grown accustomed was decreasing. Zach recalled, “I remember for every negative statement you had to have so many positive statements to counter it . . . it’s not just character

education but character building, and you have to build on those positive interactions with students.”

The four to one made the teachers more conscious of saying positive comments. Teachers tend to get in a rut and say negative things and look at the negative end of it or say the glass is half empty instead of looking at the glass half full. So it made the teachers more conscious of making positive remarks to teach core values. (Jedi, Teacher)

Embedding positive language into the operations of the school presented a united environment in which staff were able to remind students and themselves of the good things they were doing and they would make mistakes. There was a mutual investment for teachers to be better for their students and ultimately for students to be better for teachers.

### **Visual Reinforcement**

Christian stated, “There is an adage that states, ‘A picture is worth a thousand words’ and in my opinion, that statement cannot be more true than when working to implement character education within a school or any organization for that matter.” Most of the study participants referenced the importance of not only physically modeling for students the expectations for which they would be held accountable but also having visual representations of what the character education program meant for BOA Middle. While the message of being a school of good character was spoken often on the school grounds, staff, students, parents, and visitors were bombarded with visual reinforcements about the program. In a study performed by Clarke (2014), the researcher asserted descriptors representing how students might learn any content that is being taught stating,



“Some are visual absorbers, some auditory, some experiential . . . some creative, some written or verbal re-callers . . .” (p. 16). The importance of having positive character representations about the campus provided another avenue through which the character-based message could permeate the school atmosphere.

The school used matrices to display the four character traits important at BOA and provided location specific expectations based on those character traits. Visual reminders clothed the school corridors and other areas from the restrooms and commons areas to the cafeteria and gym.

There were posters throughout the building. Each classroom had the mascot acronym and what it stood for and when I talk about posters throughout the building, they were everywhere. There were some in the restrooms; some in the cafeteria, there were some in the hallways. There were the scrolling announcements that had reminders to the students and staff about what we were supposed to do and expected to do each day. There was a lot of visuals and verbal reminders. (Olivia, Teacher)

The posters provided a visual reference for the BOA character program to which students and staff alike could refer to hold one another accountable for being a Panther of Character. Lickona (1996) and R. Davidson (2009) reiterated the importance of maintaining an atmosphere in which all stakeholders are bombarded with a strong and consistent character message due to the potential for detractors that derail any character efforts.

Bulletin boards through the school focused on character and were created by individual teams of teachers with their students. The displays strategically mentioned

other character traits and values that could assist the school community in improving the school environment. Medina Maven expressed,

. . . our character committee worked hard to have really wonderful displays throughout the school that reminded the students and staff that this is a great place to be and that this is what you need to do to work well with others. You could see it walking in every hallway . . . Teachers had displays in their classrooms dedicated to character. Character education moments were shared during the morning show. Positive character was reinforced on the school bulletin which was an electronic power point that showed throughout the classrooms, in the commons area. Additionally, there were really wonderful murals in the cafeteria that just truly reinforced how to be a good student, teacher, and person overall. (Medina Maven, Support Staff)

Study participants also recalled the use of Panther dollars and dimes as other visual reminders of what it meant to have good character. Panther dollars and dimes were used by students to purchase items from the school store. Some of the items included school spirit wear that was donated by multiple school apparel vendors who had students attending the school. Pencils, papers, snacks, all of which bore the school's name and four character traits were available at the school store, and students also purchased items as gifts for other schoolmates at times. The Panther dollars and dimes represented visual, yet tangible reinforcements that were used to reward students extrinsically in the hopes of generating intrinsic motivation for maintaining the daily Panther Pledge. Jedi Warrior, an exceptional children's teacher, summed up the Panther currency:

Even if they weren't doing as well in their class [academically] but they were showing great character in the classroom or anywhere else on campus, they got their incentive to go to the store and shop. That was a success for them that some had never had before. It made them begin to think, okay, I can do this right. I can

be and do good things. As a result, I feel they were more open to learning the hows of character and not the whats that they could get.

Brooks and Kann (1993) state, “The visual representation of character values is, in effect, an advertising campaign intended to keep the words, concepts, and behaviors learned in class at the forefront of students’ attention. Visual displays illustrate and reinforce good character” (p. 20). The BOA Middle school community made considerable strides to emphasize its four character traits message to all its constituents from bulletin board displays, strategically-placed character matrices, and Panther money used to purchase items of the students’ choosing. The constant bombardment of character through these means cultivated the atmosphere for more consistently positive interactions between school stakeholders that would directly impact students.

### **Parental Involvement**

Parental support and involvement during the character education implementation process led to a partnership that resulted in remarkable outcomes. Swadener (2012) concurs with the necessity of parental involvement which requires “authentic relationships between home and school and . . . authentic partnerships that integrate parents and the home culture into the school . . .” (p. 20). The school solicited parental support whether through volunteerism or attending student-led events at the school. During the three-year implementation process, participants reported a considerable increase in parent visibility within the school. The welcomed parent involvement directly impacted students’ success academically, socially, and in terms of their character.

Teachers also found communications with parents were less antagonistic as the good news of BOA student achievement was being voiced through the community. The school experienced multitudes of parents wanting to join in with the school and be lunch buddies, mentors, school advocates, and tutors—whatever BOA needed. There was a sense of unification during this time that had not been experienced for a while as parents in the BOA community began to want their children to attend BOA because of the great strides being made towards the school's improvement. Allison provided one example of a partnership that developed through the school's efforts:

There was a parent of a student that was in the sixth grade who talked about how fearful she was about her child coming to our middle school but by mid-year she was getting other parents involved telling them how amazing this place was. She became a strong advocate for our school not just in our community but also with the district leaders as well. (Allison Boyd, Support Staff)

Lucas referenced the impact in the school that another parent had once she committed to partnering with BOA:

She got things donated and seemed to be here every day doing something. When she came back, she always seemed to have a new parent with her. She went out to get people and schooled them on our character ed stuff and found ways to build up our school by getting our community back on board. (Lucas, Teacher)

While the BOA character education program implementation proceeded, participants noted a resurgence in the school's Parent Teacher Association (PTA). Instead of parents leaving BOA to investigate other education options for their students, they were coming to the school, rolling up their sleeves, and getting to work to improve their school further. Curriculum nights, ball games, awards assemblies all were met with

standing-room only attendance as the middle school community rallied around its students and staff. Parents who had children that matriculated through BOA during the previously turbulent years prior to the character program shared testimonials with new BOA parents about the remarkable transformation BOA had undergone.

The PTA took the lead with fledgling middle school parents to explain the importance of embracing the four character traits BOA Middle stressed at the center of its program. Some PTA parents participated on the character and leadership teams where the data was reported about how BOA progressed through the implementation. They shared this same information during PTA Board and general body meetings held at the school. Parents partnered with the school for the common goal of achieving morally good, academically sound students and embraced the connection with BOA that cultivated a genuine relationship. The overwhelming BOA parent base realized the excitement and buzz with the BOA character initiatives and invested their time and resources for the benefit of all students at the school.

Dewitt Clinton and Joseph Lancaster, two prominent educators, agree “. . . if parents and schools worked as partners, they could have an influence on the character development of children in particular” (Jeynes, 2014, p. 152). Brooks and Kann (1993) validate the importance of parental involvement stating, “Character education programs are most effective and enduring when the school routinely confers with parents, lets them know what is being taught, and involves them . . .” (p. 21). The school community at BOA Middle was enhanced via the joint efforts of the school staff and parents united together to ensure students’ moral and academic success. The consolidation of parents

and staff character education endeavors on the school and home fronts cultivated an atmosphere at BOA Middle that experienced a climatic and cultural shift.

### **Summary**

This study investigated the implementation of an exemplary character education program at BOA Middle and its implications for school improvement. As stated before, character education cannot be restrained within a pre-packaged program; however, for the sake of sparing confusion I refer to a program in this study. There are three Cs that related to the BOA program's implementation—consistency, consistency, consistency.

There was a message of “this school will be a school of character” that was intertwined within each operation and interaction that occurred at the school. The message of respect, responsibility, integrity, and caring that laid the framework for the CE program permeated the school community and presented opportunities for all stakeholders to reflect on their practices within the learning environment. Visual reinforcements bombarded the corridors and commons areas as a reminder of the consistent character message. The caring adults involved in educating the children exuded positivity through their conversations with each other and their students. Parents realized the transformation to the teaching and learning environment that was taking place within the school and partnered with the school as a home front reinforcement of the solidarity in the school's endeavors.

### **Character Education Fosters School Improvement as Adults Lead and Students Achieve**

This study examined adult perceptions of the influence of character education program implementation at BOA Middle School and its contribution to the school's

improvement. Participants shared their opinions regarding: How do adult stakeholders who participated in the implementation of an exemplary middle school character education program construct the influence of the character education program on overall middle school culture and climate?

Participants provided me with a backdrop of the nature of the climate and culture of the school prior to the implementation of the character education program. The school environment was one in which disciplinary actions were substantial and all hell was breaking loose. Teachers were completely exhausted not because they were teaching and students were learning but because they were not having much opportunity to teach and student learning was at a premium. The environment was not conducive to teaching and learning and everyone seemed to be at odds with each other. One participant said it like this,

It was total chaos. It wasn't if there was going to be a fight, but when and how many. I saw a child against the concrete and her head . . . blood dripping from her nose and the big old egg on her head. I got between two girls fighting, and I remember our counselor coming along and picking up the hair they had pulled out of each other's heads off the floor. I had gotten to the point that I just said I can't teach anymore. I mean I wanted to make a difference in children's lives, but I can't do it this way. I just can't and we were all brow beaten and pretty beat up. Administrators focus was on [academic] data. The head administrator at that time never came out of their office. We had an assistant principal quit. We were down to one assistant administrator out in the trenches, and it was too much even for that one person to cover . . . We were fighting [kids] getting inducted into gangs and using drugs on campus, and I would have never thought we would have these problems at BOA but we did. We had teachers quit in the middle of the year. We lost about half the staff; it was terrible! (Jedi Warrior, Teacher)

**School Leadership is Critical**

A major finding that arose from the study was the belief that the school leadership's involvement in the implementation process was critical to producing a shift in the culture and climate of the school. Most of the participants made reference specifically to the school principal's involvement in the process; however, other members of the administrative team and character education team at the school were recognized as contributing factors. Berkowitz and Bier (2004) affirm "the school leader is the most critical individual in the success or failure of a character education initiative" (p. 77). If any staff member should embrace the initiative, the school principal should.

A principal committed to the implementation process has the ability to push the character agenda within the school. He or she must be a cheerleader of sorts that rallies the staff, parents, and students to develop the skills that are desired to make the program a success. Participants reported that having the reassurance that their principal and the entire administrative team was supporting them, even though they might make mistakes from time to time, was a significant burden off their shoulders. The actions associated with the administration's involvement included maintaining an expectation for staff and students to treat each other the way they wanted to be treated themselves. Something as simple as knowing all teachers' names and most students' names was a significant observation of the staff. The principal demonstrated a level of care and commitment to his school community and displayed how he expected staff to interact with students and parents. Zach referenced the modeling that the school leadership displayed for staff members regarding their interactions. He said,



. . . it was like the perfect storm. Things started from the top down and trickled into everything else. There was an expectation of demonstrating respect . . . demonstrating that this is a place where you want to be and you want to make sure that you communicate that to all students. Stuff like speaking to individual students and addressing them in an appropriate fashion . . . modeling that for us. Things like that were really significant.

The administration's commitment to the character education implementation process cultivated an atmosphere in which positive interactions were the standard. Everyone else seemed to follow their lead. There was an explicitly high standard for "thinking, feeling, and doing" character education amongst the school community that was like a tacit curriculum taught by the principal, but it was consistent with the four character traits on which BOA built its program. Parents felt the change in the dynamic of the school as it was led by the administration. Karen Kohl shared her experience while volunteering in the office from time to time how the BOA administration would deal with students. She shared,

. . . it goes back to administration cause when you pull a student into your office and you know all along you've had good character . . . being respectful to that one student with that problem makes a world of difference. It seemed as though our principals were not trying to make that quick judgement call to send a student out because they wanted the kids to trust that they were trying to help them and not hurt them. Now they did have to suspend some kids, but it was obvious they took their time to know each kid really well even if they had to put them out.

The Character Education Partnership (as cited in Berkowitz & Bier, 2004) validates the school leaders approach regarding character education initiative implementation stating, "An effective principal needs to (1) "get it," (2) "buy into it," and (3) "live it . . . the principal must really commit to this vision and truly want to make it

happen under his or her watch” (p. 77). Berkowitz and Bier (2004) acknowledge the necessity for the principal to embody the requisite skill to embrace quality character initiatives through personal and programmatic dedication to the process. Because a role of the school principal is to develop other school leaders, he must cultivate the identification of quality character education, the adherence to a “We will be a school of character vision,” and the perseverance to maintain interactions that create opportunities for the school community to be successful. Principals training other leaders under his administration should make this a priority or be willing to sever professional ties to those unwilling to embrace the positive character qualities expected by all school staff. Jedi Warrior expressed the importance of an administration that committed to the process. She commented,

You just can't do character education effectively unless you have an administrative team that buys into it. If the kids and teachers don't see their leaders buying into it, why should they? The leaders can't just talk the talk; they have to do the walk, too. Watching how my administrator's approached character development was nothing short of amazing, especially my principal. I heard him speak and when you heard him it was like listening to a minister preaching a sermon. You bought into it but you can tell by his teachers that he led them to the water and then he led the kids to the water. So it's trickle down. Gotta have the administrators; you gotta have the teachers and then you've gotta have the parents and kids.

### **Teaching and Learning Environment Improvement**

Implementing the character education program at BOA Middle produced a positive shift in the total school environment as described by the study participants. The shift was due to factors such as a consolidated effort by the school community to work

together to accomplish a common goal—an improved educational environment in which staff, students, and parents held each other accountable for prosocial and academic gains. There was a profound expectation for good character and accountability in the school that reinforced the four character traits of BOA Middle’s CE program—respect for oneself and others, responsibility in and for actions, integrity in decision making, and caring for the school and community through exhibiting school pride.

Perceptions about the school environment changed for the better as the neighboring community began to cast the school in a more positive light than before. The school community internalized the realization that character education was important, not just for students, but for everyone who dealt with the students on a regular basis. Parents inquired about the traits that were being taught at BOA in an effort to reiterate the same traits at their homes. Students started to believe that the BOA Middle that some of their older siblings had attended was a different school and they were a part of the transformation.

The students began to hold each other accountable for their actions—in their actions around the school but also in their academics as well. They felt that being a better person should include being a better student. Blank tutorial log books that had collected dust on classroom tables became filled with names of students who were beginning to realize the impact of their academic efforts to perform better in the classroom. When they achieved, it made them feel better and naturally the parents were ecstatic as well. The teaching and learning environment became one in which students participated in less mischievous behaviors and exhibited more studious behaviors. Cam Freeman, an

elective teacher, said, “whatever trait we were working on as a school it was pushed at home and even the kids would remind us teachers, ‘Hey, you know that ain’t how we do things here’ so character was always being taught.” Lickona, Schaps, and Lewis (2003) postulate the importance of actively engaging all members of the school community as “full partners” in the implementation process.

Miller (2012) believes that inviting a school community to rally around character education initiatives has the potential to produce “the thrill of academic success [that] is realized for all school stakeholders” (p. 713). He contends, “More importantly, when good character is modeled for students, it breeds the type of environment in which significant teaching and learning can take place. It also cultivates the type of academic success on standardized tests of which many schools dream” (Miller, 2012, p. 713).

### **Decreased Discipline**

Another important finding in the research was during the three-year implementation process of character education at BOA Middle, the school experienced decreased incidents of discipline referrals. This translated to fewer incidents of in-school and out-of-school suspensions. Figures 2-4 depict the numbers of in-school and out-of-school suspensions logged for BOA Middle during the 2007/2008, 2008/2009, and 2009/2010 school years, respectively, and these three school years correspond to the year of implementation of the character education program.

By Consequence			
Consequence	Incident	Perpetrator	Consequence
In-School Suspension	933	343	1,000
Out-Of-School Suspension 10 days or less	291	185	369
Total (*Unduplicated Count)	*1220	*381	1369

### School Consequence Count / Consequence

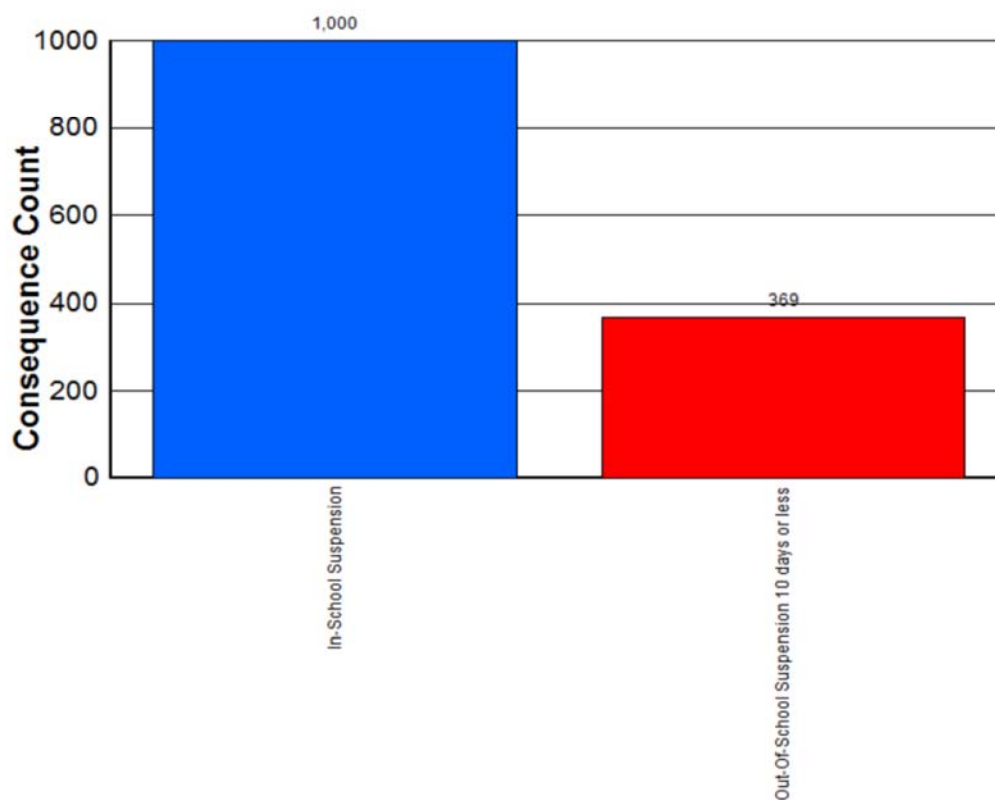


Figure 2. BOA Middle School Consequence Count/Consequences for 2007/2008.

By Consequence			
Consequence	Incident	Perpetrator	Consequence
In-School Suspension	767	307	807
Out-Of-School Suspension 10 days or less	225	140	258
Total (*Unduplicated Count)	*991	*343	1065

### School Consequence Count / Consequence

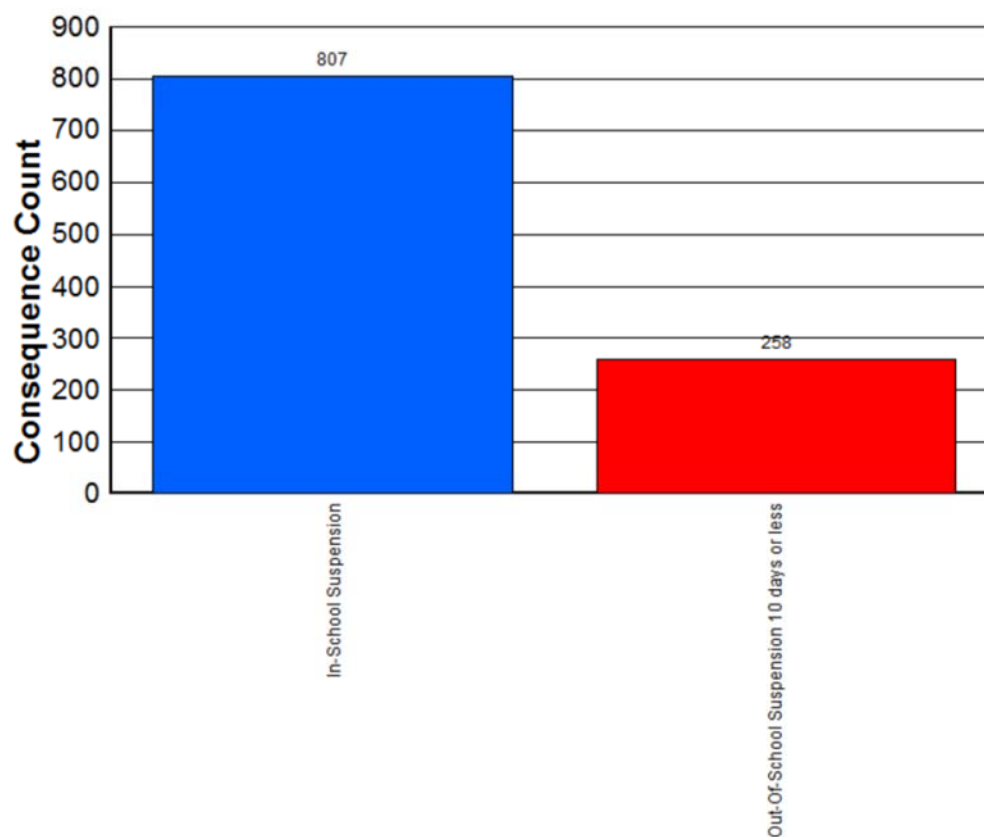


Figure 3. BOA Middle School Consequence Count/Consequence for 2008/2009.

By Consequence			
Consequence	Incident	Perpetrator	Consequence
In-School Suspension	561	254	639
Out-Of-School 11 to 299 days	3	3	3
Out-Of-School Suspension 10 days or less	150	117	194
Total (*Unduplicated Count)	*710	*279	836

### School Consequence Count / Consequence

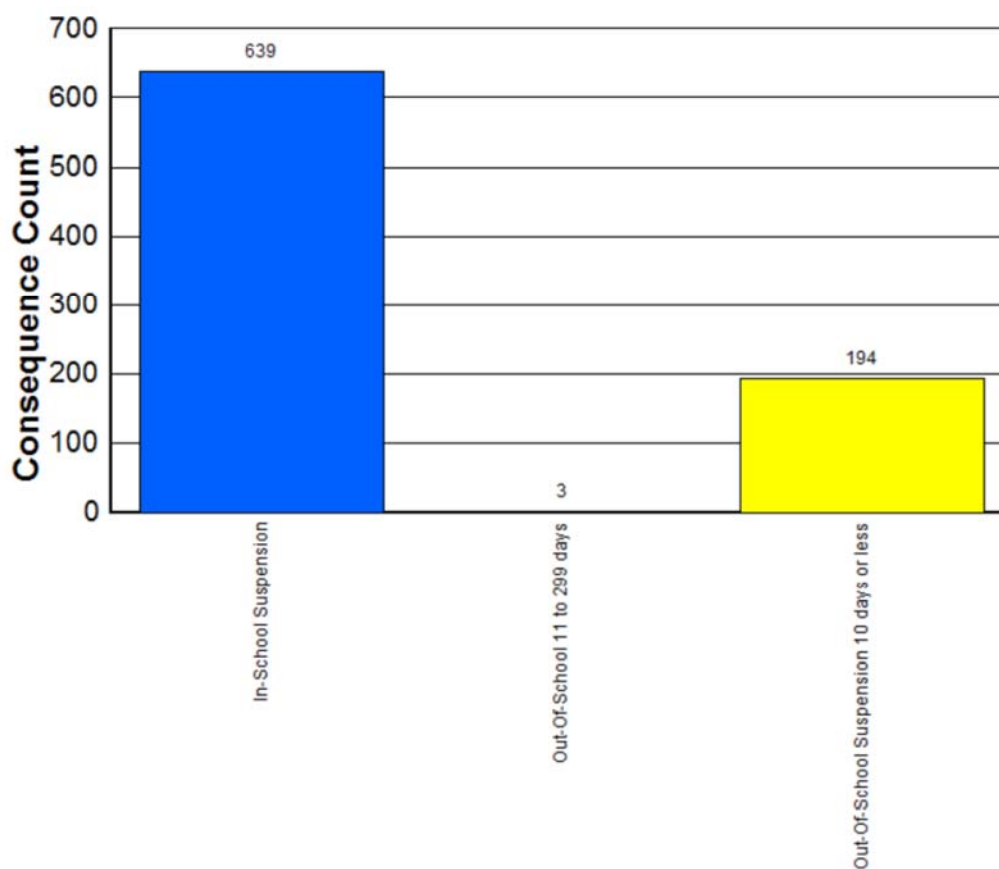


Figure 4. BOA Middle School Consequence Count/Consequence for 2009/2010.

Christian Carlson stated,

When I tell you that this school was in trouble, it was. We were one of several middle schools in our state on the list for potential reconstitution in which everyone has to reapply for their job—including me, and I'd just gotten here. Imagine that! Students were being suspended from school by the droves. I mean, before we started this process when I got here . . . the year before we started our

character work together, there were over 550 out of school suspensions and this represented 550 different students! How can you possibly expect to grow students when they are being put out of school at such an alarming rate and how can we expect them to like coming here when we don't give them a chance to BE here? Our A-Team shared all our data with the staff when I first started here—the good, bad, and ugly. I think they were surprised just like me. I committed to them then that we were going to turn our school around for the better through character education but warned them that we would have to be the first partakers and be the change we wanted to see. During that first year, we reduced our out of school suspensions by over 33% and by the end of year three we had dropped our suspensions by over 65%. This ain't rocket science, man. You can't teach kids when they're not in school. I believe by their mere presence at school instead of sitting home their ability to improve academically increased. That's what I felt our teachers had to understand and hoped that this process would help them be more intentional about connecting with kids through our character initiatives. You know, somebody said, "kids don't care how much you know until they know how much you care" and I sincerely believe that.

The student body seemed to change when they felt as though they were actually part of the school and had an environment in which they could learn and grow. In previous times, students had not really had an option to voice their opinions about what worked for them. Michelle felt as though the students weren't respected or listened to as much before the school implemented its program but then staff became more open to students' opinions and their thoughts. Despite the fact that the students' line of thinking might have been errant, students knew the staff was starting to listen, and they as students mattered."

All participants were clear that disciplinary actions did not completely cease due to implementing the character program. Students still found themselves in disappointing situations and consequences had to be issued; however, participants felt that their knowledge of the four character traits of the BOA program made them more flexible when dealing with incidents of inappropriate behavior. It also made them reflect on their



own youth and the mistakes they made as well. Olivia stated, “. . . adults were being a more cognizant in the way they interacted with students, in a more positive manner trying to make sure they had more positive interactions as opposed to all negative interactions . . . students were just used to negativity.”

One participant, Caroline, made it clear that she felt there were instances that should have resulted in referrals to the office, but that they were not reported. She felt this was done to provide a skewed count of the disciplinary actions that took place at BOA. In contrast, Elise, a school administrator, acknowledged the first year drop in disciplinary actions because students were holding each other accountable for their actions and reiterating the character traits of BOA’s program. After the Year 1 decrease, the school community could focus on the academic gains of the school.

The reduction in disciplinary actions by the staff at BOA attributed to the number of teachable moments that presented themselves during the school day and outside of the school day. Because the school was plastered with visual reinforcements of the program, it was easy for staff and students to hold each other to maintaining expectations and as a result, participants believed incidents of in and out of school suspensions decreased significantly.

### **Increased Student Achievement**

During the implementation of the character education program at the school, there was a marked increase in the academic performance of the students in the school. Table 2 depicts student academic performance increases by different subgroups during the first year of implementation. Under the state accountability model during this time, a

subgroup was comprised of at least 40 students. It is important to note that the state reading test was re-normed and the data could not be compared with the year prior; however, Table 1 represents the results for math and reading in all BOA Middle subgroups after the character education implementation.

Table 2

BOA Middle Academic Performance by Subgroup from 2006 to 2008

<b>BOA Middle School Subgroups</b>	Reading 2007–2008	Math 2006–2007	Math 2007–2008
All Students	50.1%	54.5%	67.6%
African American	41.5%	43.2%	60.4%
Hispanic	44.6%	40.9%	69.6%
White	60.7%	67.0%	74.8%
Free Reduced Lunch	41.7%	42.7%	64.0%
Limited English Proficient	23.6%	24.4%	50.9%
Students with Disabilities	16.2%	26.0%	46.2%

Often academic increases in one year are difficult to sustain during subsequent years; however, as BOA Middle school community continued to implement character education, students' academic performance continued to improve. Table 3 represents sustained academic increases that were experienced at the school.

Table 3

BOA Middle Academic Performance by Subgroup from 2007 to 2009

<b>BOA Middle School Subgroups</b>	Reading 2007–2008	Reading 2008–2009	Math 2007–2008	Math 2008–2009
All Students	50.1%	62.3%	67.6%	80.6%
African American	41.5%	54.8%	60.4%	74.8%
Hispanic	44.6%	55.6%	69.6%	84.0%
White	60.7%	75.7%	74.8%	88.0%
Free Reduced Lunch	41.7%	55.0%	64.0%	74.9%
Limited English Proficient	23.6%	35.8%	50.9%	79.2%
Students with Disabilities	16.2%	32.7%	46.2%	53.5%

Many participants attributed the increase in academic performance to the incorporation of BOA’s fundamental character education traits into the curricula the teachers taught. Some of the staff referenced science classes that incorporated the content and tied it to service learning. Teachers used hydroponics lessons in which food was grown in two-liter soda bottles to feed people in need. The food was donated to local pantries. Others investigated the impact of collecting money for the needy and how their efforts could sustain a small community of people. It became obvious that students began to tie their curricula to events happening in their community and they began to seek ways in which they could assist in meeting the needs of its citizens. Because the learning in the classroom was translating to areas outside the school, students were “consistently manipulating what we were trying to teach them both academically and character wise and I believe that coupled with teachers teaching like their hair was on fire

was the foundation for our school's success during this time" (Christian Carlson, Administrator).

Angel Quick felt that growing students' confidence in themselves helped them to take their academics even more seriously. As students took time to try to do better on assessments they were, in effect, working harder to increase their scores because they believed they could. They respected themselves enough to try. They did not want to fail their teachers but more importantly, they did not want to fail themselves. Many advised that they experienced the best three years of their teaching career during the 2007 – 2010 school years as the implementation of the BOA CE program yielded their best scores. Brenda reflected on what she called the "best three years of her teaching career" saying,

I'll say I got my best scores during those three years. When it comes to achievement, I think achievement is so much easier in a place of caring, support, and stability. I believe a strong character education program, when done correctly, can increase scores. When you're in a place where you feel safe and cared for, you tend to want to do better.

### **Reduced Teacher Turnover**

The implementation of the CE program at BOA led to a reduction in the teacher turnover rate at the school. Several participants referenced a pre-implementation scenario in which their colleagues were consistently being out of work and ultimately leaving the school because of their frustrations with the environment there. Compounding this was a substitute teacher pool that dwindled as no one wanted to come to sub at BOA due to the atmosphere. The implementation of the CE program led to conditions in which teachers wanted to be in school each day and did not mind coming to work. The teacher turnover

rate at BOA decreased from 33% the year prior to CE program implementation to 11% at the end of the 2010 school year. In the event a teacher absence was necessary, the process for finding substitutes became much easier as the school atmosphere became more conducive to teaching and learning.

My experience has been when a student is with their teacher in an environment that fosters good, engaging teaching and learning, those students simply do better academically. If your kids know you give a darn about them, I believe they would break their necks to perform for us because they don't want to feel like they've let us down, or more importantly, themselves down. To me that is part of the reason that character education is so important and that educators help lead the charge in schools to ensure its perpetual success. (Christian Carlson, Administrator)

## **Summary**

The research was clear regarding the significance of the school principal's leadership in the success of any character-building initiatives (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Miller, 2012; Ryan, 2012). The principal provided reassurance to his staff through constant encouragement and modeling of expectations within the building. However, the principal had to enlist other adult leaders in the process in the form of the Character Development Team. These teacher leaders were the resident gurus for assisting staff with practices that would cultivate an environment in the school based on the four foundational character traits that comprised the CE program.

An improved teaching and learning environment ensued at the school as a result of teachers, parents, administrators, and students making a conscious effort to maintain the goal of transforming the educational atmosphere in their school. Teachers no longer jumped ship at the first sign of difficulty and enjoyed coming to work to help students

reach their fullest potential. They internalized the realization that character education was not only for students but it was also for them as well.

As students connected their character to their academic performance, they were less inclined to participate in mischievous or detrimental behaviors which led to a decline in disciplinary referrals. Children felt that they were a part of something special happening at the school. It was not the BOA Middle that their older siblings had endured in the past complete with a toxic setting, but it became a place in which they could be safe, engage caring adults, and excel without excuses.

### **School Communities Can Support Character Education through Collaboration, Service Learning, and Reflection**

This research explored the implementation of the character education program and its perceived influence on the attitudes and practices of the school staff and those of others, namely parents and students. During the data analysis, participants shared sentiments that addressed the following research question: How do adult stakeholders who participated in the implementation of an exemplary middle school character education program describe and critique the influence of the character education program on their own attitudes and practices and those of others? Research participants most concurred that the implementation of character education impacted their attitudes and practices as related to their respective roles.

#### **Collaborative School Community**

Study participants reported the development of a more collaborative school community in which students, staff, and parents worked in conjunction with one another to create opportunities for them to improve the school. Teachers in the study recalled

their inability to work with others because they felt as though they were barely keeping their heads above water for years. They referenced that this was due to the deterioration of the school environment to the point of a mass exodus of teachers and students and their families from the school.

The struggling days before CE program implementation had not afforded an environment in which people wanted to work much less collaborate. Lucas Keuchley and Caroline Hayes alluded to the conditions under which the school community was declining. Lucas recalled, “We needed something cause here we were just treading water trying to figure out what we’re gonna do. . . . We lost teachers, students—heck, we lost a lot of things and it really changed the dynamic in our school.” Caroline stated, “Those were some struggling days before we implemented character at BOA. Teachers just got sick and tired of being sick and tired . . . it was like forget teaching, am I gonna survive? Who wants to work like that?” The toxic elements that existed at BOA disintegrated the relationships between the adults in the building, including school staff and parents, and in the larger sense students and staff.

Research participants spoke fondly of the collaborative spirit within the school that was fostered as a result of the implementation of the CE program. Because of the past issues within the school from minor district violations such as skipping and cheating to major violations such as drugs, fighting, and assaults, participants felt an obligation to try to maintain their own classes because that was the only priority for which they had time. Parents and the neighboring communities were nonexistent in the school and there was an “us against them” mentality within the school environment.

The CE program implementation developed a structure for staff, parents, and students to work together to process and digest each other's ideas about the way operations needed to occur within classrooms and the school, in general. Students observed an influx of parents throughout the school as involved stakeholders intent on helping the school and its students achieve. The implementation of the character initiatives at BOA was enhanced by providing various avenues by which adults in the community could collaborate with the school to further the character education program. R. L. Peterson and Skiba (2001) suggest multiple ways in which schools can support the community to be willing participants in the implementation process and thus cultivate the collaboration:

- Schools can help by offering parents and guardians opportunities to develop their caregiving skills.
- Schools can assist parents by stressing learning at home through supplementary academic (and character-building) tasks for their children.
- Schools must consistently and accurately communicate to the community the progress they are making and solicit their continued support in the process.
- Schools must provide opportunities for volunteering for their community.
- Schools must create a system of shared decision making thus developing a higher degree of ownership from all stakeholders.
- Schools must utilize community resources in which collaboration may be generated by nature of the resource.



Each of these suggested components were adorned the CE program at BOA Middle. The school held curriculum nights in which parents and other community members were advised of the character education program and its intent. Sessions were convened that apprised the community of how they could encourage character development within their homes and communities. BOA Middle also ensured that students and their parents were aware of how they were progressing as a school often reporting discipline data via the school's morning show and reiterating expectations for areas in which their targets were not met. In addition, the school administration shared the same information through written and verbal correspondence in letters sent home and the school's community call system to which the PCS district subscribed. The principal would talk about the character program in letters sent home, and that correspondence always contained the four character traits of the BOA program.

Volunteerism in the school increased during character education implementation as parents and the neighboring community rallied around the school. Constituents outside the school were welcomed and solicited to join the school in its character development efforts. The Latino Influence Organization, an organization aimed at bridging cultural gaps that might hinder the school's efforts, were consulted and invited to present to a growing Latino population in the school. The school and organization forged an invaluable partnership that assisted the school in overcoming language and cultural barriers that could have thwarted the efforts.

R. L. Peterson and Skiba (2001) posit, "Though specifics may vary, all parent involvement programs share the goal of increasing parent-school collaboration to

promote healthy child development and safe school communities” (p. 157). The implementation of the character education program at BOA sparked a collaborative conflagration that encouraged stakeholders’ connections to the school to get involved—a feat that had not been accomplished prior to implementation. Study participants shared that increasing positive interactions with parents and those within the school bred conditions by which unity and collaboration could flourish for the benefit of the school.

### **Service Learning**

Participants in the study reported what they called a school-wide commitment to social responsibility through service learning. The Corporation for National Service (as cited in Billig, 2000) suggests the growth and development of participants’ [character] through engagement in service which meets the following criteria:

- The service is conducted in and meets the needs of a community;
- The service is coordinated with an elementary school, secondary school, institution of higher education, or community service program and with the community;
- The service helps to foster civic responsibility;
- The service is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum of the students, or the educational components of the community-service program in which the participants are enrolled; and
- The service provides structured items for the students or participants to reflect on service experience. (p. 659)

A school in which students who were sent to the office for fighting began fighting again while awaiting administrative conference, and that had once been on the verge of reconstitution began to harbor students and staff who recognized their obligations to make their community better. Teachers began to look for ways in which they and their

students could actively participate in service projects that were tied to their various curricula.

Participants recalled the wave of support within the school amongst students, staff, and parents to work to remedy negative issues within their school community, surrounding areas, and the world. Food drives were held to support local food banks that provided many BOA families with meals. Teachers used these activities to help classes track the potential impact of the food donations on families in the school community and beyond. Math skills were utilized to graphically plot the number of families that could be fed through the pounds of food that were donated.

The process of incorporating the service activities to academic curricula was supported by Anderson (1998) who states, “. . . service learning involves a blending of service activities with the academic curriculum in order to address real community needs while students learn through active engagement” (p. 9). Coble (2014) states, “Service-learning becomes a tool to enhance teaching and student learning, rather than being viewed as a stand-alone or an add-on . . . The goal of service-learning . . . is geared toward a community connection” (p. 22).

Billig (2000) supports multiple advantages to the utilization of service learning in the creation of more socially responsive and civic minded students. Benefits supported by participants in this study were:

- Service learning helps students become more knowledgeable and realistic about careers;
- Service learning leads to more positive perceptions of schools and youths on the part of the community members; and

- Service learning has a positive effect on the personal development of public school youths. (pp. 660–662)

Regarding students' increased knowledge and realism towards their own future careers, Lucas Keuchley, Michelle Marsh, Olivia Jones, and Medina Maven referenced former BOA students who have pursued careers in which service is a major part. Medina explained the impact that service learning had on BOA students that she has observed personally, particularly as related to their chosen career paths.

These kids were truly invested in their education and from what I've seen, these kids have gone on, and I run into them occasionally. They still talk about just doing positive things for other people. I've run into several students who are now firefighters or they are in the service or they are wanting to be teachers and do the same thing. They've gone on to become great . . . I've seen some students who are now working in service professions, and I feel like the service learning we did during our character education program had a great impact on that.

The positive impact of service learning on youth has been supported by multiple researchers (Billig, 2009; Coble, 2014). Coble (2014) states, “. . . service-learning capitalizes on what other studies have shown to make a difference in the development of character traits. . . . As students provide meaningful service, they collaborate and develop relationships and partnerships with adults who genuinely care about them” (p. 51).

Service learning became a critical piece in the BOA program that provided a vehicle through which some of the most difficult to handle students became willing partners in the school's effort to better the community around the school. Research participants felt that service learning allowed the students to look outside themselves and

see the interconnection of the community in which the school was and their own personal being. One participant remarked,

Our kids got a grant from local business and we did things for three of their schoolmates who had fallen on hard times. The learned that we are not going to buy ourselves something, but we are going to buy somebody else something that really has less than we do. And that's the [character] education part of it. It's not only the teaching but the doing also. They have to be doing it and modeling it so that they can then live it whether they are around us or not. (Jedi Warrior, Teacher)

Through the character education program in which service learning became a school-wide focus, the students became more sensitive to the needs of others and in the process embraced the positive character message intended within the school. It also allowed the students to couple their service with curricular themes they were engaging in the classroom.

### **Increased Reflective Practitioners**

Research participants reported that the school environment transitioned to a collegial atmosphere in which the staff began to convey a greater sense of obligation to its students through reflective practice both socially and academically. Benninga et al. (2006) suggest, “. . . to be effective, character education requires adults to act like adults in an environment where children are respected and feel physically and psychologically safe to engage in the academic and social activities that prepare them for later adult decision making” (p. 452). Vincent (1999) agrees, stating, “We must be pro-active to help students formulate standards or concepts that will help them in all their pursuits in life . . . teachers [must] model what we wish our students to do” (p. 85). The built-in

capacity for the BOA CE program to cause reflection within the teachers helped teachers to consider the ways in which they interacted with each other and students. There was a consensus that held the staff to educating children in a manner consistent with the four character traits and not reminiscent of the former vitriol that was once a norm. Vince said,

... those negative elements didn't feel comfortable any longer in the building. The character program is about people put in certain situations and reflecting. I don't want it misconstrued that I mean kids. I do mean adults, too. Rather than berate a kid in class, which is what was happening before we started our character journey, we began to have discussions about how we could handle ourselves better as a staff.

The intent of the CE program was to improve BOA Middle by developing students and staff that would produce conditions in which teaching and learning could occur. Not only did the program build students; it also built adults as well. In the process, the school became an institution in which better adults were helping better children to produce better results. M. Davidson et al. (2008a) suggest the creation of a learning atmosphere in which a staff encourages each other to become better. The researchers posit,

... we are advocating an environment where participation in the [ethical learning] community means not simply 'passing the put-up' (the 'warm-fuzzy' stereotype of character education held by many high school educators) but constantly challenging each other to be the best persons we can be. (p. 382)

Several study participants cited a practice of having a guiding principle that would govern their interactions not just in the school but with spouses, significant others, church

members, and other community partners. Ryan and Bohlin (2001) support this type of practice in which adults select “words to live by” advising individuals to “. . . identify a substantive quotation or anecdote from which they can begin to develop a personal motto” (p. 15). Christian expressed,

The Golden Rule was my personal mantra. I always tried to reflect on my interactions with staff, students, parents—everybody. I was always asking myself, ‘Would what I’m about to do or say going to be the way I’d want to be treated?’ and I think that saved me a lot of grief and helped build a culture of mutual respect amongst all of us.

## **Summary**

The BOA community played a vital role in the success of the school’s CE program. The implementation process created conditions for parents, teachers, and administrators to collaborate for the benefit of the students they held in common. The school communicated the successes and areas for growth associated with the implementation of the program. This allowed them to provide valuable insight that would garner more support to reach their goals.

The refreshing environment that embraced parent visits and collaboration gave rise to increased volunteerism in the school as well as opportunities for the stakeholders to partner in service learning activities. These sometimes massive undertakings were incorporated within the curricula taught at the school so that student could connect the learning with their surrounding community, a dynamic Coble (2014) reported as a major facet of service learning.

The collegial teaching and learning paradigm that grew at BOA Middle was brought about by the increased reflective introspection in which the school staff engaged. Benninga et al. (2006) stated, “. . . to be effective, character education requires adults to act like adults in an environment where children are respected and feel physically and psychologically safe to engage in the academic and social activities that prepare them for later adult decision making” (p. 452). Such an environment was cultivated through the BOA CE Program and the school experienced tremendous school improvement.

### **Critique of Character Education Program Implementation**

This research aimed to explore the implementation of the exemplary character education program at BOA Middle School and how participants appraised and critiqued components of implementation success and perceived obstacles. Study participants shared their thoughts that addressed the question: How do adult stakeholders who participated in the implementation of an exemplary middle school character education program appraise and critique the principles, actions, and consequences that were essential to successes and obstacles in implementation?

### **Successful CE Implementation . . .**

Berkowitz and Bier (2004) contend, “One of the factors that practitioners will repeatedly affirm is that the school leader is the most critical individual in the success or failure of a character-education initiative . . . [t]o positively impact an entire school, the school principal’s role is essential” (p. 77). They recommend the complete commitment of a character focus by the principal and the embodiment of the wherewithal to perpetuate its existence during their tenure in a school. Participants alluded to the power that the



principal's leadership during the 2007–2010 school years had on the implementation process. They referenced a belief that the culture and climate of a school can be changed by leadership along with a vision that can be realized in every aspect of the school. That vision was through the character education program which the school principal, Mr. Carlson, made his primary mission for the school. He was a character champion that epitomized the four character traits of the program through his interactions within the school community.

Jackson and Davis (2000) suggested that the principal be a change agent who incorporates the input of staff and parents as well as collaborative efforts within the community to foster school improvement and create conditions for increased student achievement. Lady T attributed the success of the implementation process to the school principal and the administrative team at BOA Middle declaring,

I believe the main ingredient to the success of the character education program was the execution of the plan directed by Mr. Carlson and his administrative team. As a leader, Mr. Carlson understood how to build and maintain relationships because of his ability to listen and empower teachers, his greatest resource, which speaks volumes of his character. He also understood how to inspire his team to reach higher, dream bigger, and achieve greater. I believe it was Warren Bennis who said something to the effect of 'Leadership is the ability to turn a vision into a reality.' That's exactly what Mr. Carlson and the administrative team did.

Gruenert and Whitaker (2015) state, "Everything that happens in an organization reflects the leadership. As the saying goes, 'When the leader sneezes, everyone else catches a cold' . . . leadership makes all the difference" (pp. 162–163).

Participants not only contributed the success of the implementation to the school principal and administrative team but also to other staff who served in leadership capacities. The middle school used lead teachers on their BOA Character Development Team (CDT), and their job was to be the resident gurus for all character-related initiatives. The team attended character professional development activities sponsored by the PCS district and abroad and returned with ideas that enhanced the BOA program. The team also assessed the success of the implementation based on trend data for student and parent concerns as well as staff issues. Modifications were made to operations within the school the administration and CDT felt needed to be made based on the school community input.

### **. . . Marred by Administrative Turnover**

Other research participants shared their experience with working with the CDT and felt that the team represented a valuable resource that assisted the school in realizing its character goals. While staff leadership through the principal and administrative team and the CDT enhanced the character education implementation process over three years, study participants suggested that the task of maintaining the progress experienced during that time waned considerably with the turnover within the school's administrative team. Karen summed up her thoughts regarding new administrators with,

I think when new administrators come on, I think there's a lot of change they want to make and I think sometimes they need to take a step back and see how it works or how it did work. I'm all for change, but I think when you're a new administrator at a school, trying to start your own program, I think it's really important to say maybe after half the year you start . . . because some people accept change really quickly and others put their heels into the ground and kids see that; they feel it in class; they see it. They know something's wrong and that

can damage any character development you accomplished over three years . . . I think once the program starts to taper that's where you have problems, and I saw that in my child's eighth grade year . . . As administrators changed and new staff came in, I could see less and less of the [character] focus that had been there before.

While the three-year implementation of the CE program produced a familial atmosphere where collaboration grew, the improved teaching and learning environment was adversely impacted by a change in school leadership. The new administration's arrival was not accompanied by the laser character education focus that had existed over the three years prior. The lack of what Jessica called "necessary leadership" caused a declining administrative interest for character initiatives to a solely academic focus to raise test scores even higher. Participants reported a gradual deterioration of what had become a high octane learning environment. Participants perceptions during this change over concur with what Berkowitz and Bier (2004) call "committed and informed leadership" (p. 82) that is a necessary ingredient for the success of any character initiatives that might be implemented at any school.

### **Increased Staff Morale**

Fineman (1999) said, "Morale has distinct emotional overtones: The feelings of attachment or belonging that a person has to a workgroup and his or her sense of commitment to the group task and spirit" (p. 290). During the three-year implementation of character education within BOA Middle, participants expressed a marked increase in staff morale such that teachers wanted to be at the school and expressed their pleasure for working at BOA. The attachment and commitment to which Fineman (1999) refers was implied by study participant, Zach, who remembered the vision for the school. Zach

recalled, “Our administration set forth the vision of character education for our school and then worked with us to put structures in place that helped to ensure that the vision was executed.” Staff simply felt better just by being at BOA Middle during the three years of the CE program implementation. Their work in character education was helping to set the tone in the school and right the ship that had gone astray.

Strong relationships developed amongst the parents and teachers for the benefit of the students. They felt as though they had allies they could rely on and who cared about them. They believed in the work they were doing together for each other’s sakes. There was the sense that the school was definitely headed in the right direction. Participants referenced the common goal of everyone working together to become better people and helping students to do the same to produce a teaching environment in which students could learn more freely. There was consensus that reaching this goal took teachers, principals, students, and parents to work together. There was an excitement during this time that had not been felt at the school for a long while as most teachers defined their work as truly making a difference. Cam Freeman advised,

Because you had a lot of people that had been there and been through what it was before we started. You had a diverse group that coordinated our efforts through the Character Development committee. It was diverse and you had a fresh breath of air for people to come in and offer new ideas. You had people that had been in the trenches and been there and knew where they wanted to be and where they had been. I think that dynamic group of people coming together was important. We were doing it together and people weren’t leaving the school anymore. Our staff stayed consistent. We stuck with it, and that made our work even more meaningful. I felt proud to be a part of my school knowing that we were making a difference not only in our students’ lives but in our own as well, and I think that was really important.

### **. . . But Lacked 100%**

While multiple study participants recalled an overall improvement in staff morale, there were those who felt that it could have been greater; however, a lack of ownership in the program implementation antagonized the growth. When participants were asked, “What do you feel were the greatest obstacles of BOA Middle’s character education program?” a resounding shared sentiment was the lack of 100% buy in or commitment of all staff to implement the character education program with fidelity.

When asked to elaborate why 100% commitment was not met, Elise Gray, Brenda, and Lucas advised that teachers felt the process took too much of their valuable instructional time given the curricular demands and testing mandates with which they were confronted. Caroline, Lucas, and Jedi Warrior referred to the sentiment that some staff shared in which they felt students should come to school knowing what is expected of them and do good things just because. Jedi shared this feeling was held by many “old school” teachers. She said, “We had one teacher . . . he was old school and thought kids should naturally come that way to him. Great person; loved kids, but he just felt they should come with that stuff. He never seemed to get with the program.”

Other participants felt the lack of complete commitment by the entire staff was due to the inconsistency with which the program was implemented. The rewards students received for “doing the right thing” presented an issue for some staff because they felt character should be intrinsically motivated; consequently, this aspect became compounded particularly when the funding for such rewards began to diminish. Participants believed extrinsic rewards can serve a purpose to fuel the program initially

but can lead to the detriment of the intent of any character initiatives—to do the good because it is the right thing to do. There was a feeling that after awhile students might have misinterpreted the rewards. They were used to provide students an incentive in the hopes that they would naturally gravitate towards maintaining the school’s foundational character traits. When depleted funding to purchase the awards was accompanied by the administrative character champion being transferred to other schools, the once brilliant program reward system lost its luster.

The practice of employing reward systems to students when building a character development atmosphere within school has been discouraged in literature. Berkowitz (2011b) suggested “a common pitfall of character education is inducing desirable (including virtuous) behaviors by rewarding students. Character is only truly developed if it is valued intrinsically” (p. 3). K. R. Williams (2010) shared this view and posits that acceptable behaviors are not cultivated by moral and character systems in which rewards or punishments are utilized. One might ask the question, “What happens if there are no rewards?” Caroline addressed this inquiry stating,

I think because kids of today are so extrinsically motivated, the lack of funding very quickly becomes a program issue for everybody in a character ed program and a school, in general. If kids are extrinsically motivated, you gotta come up with monetary ways or . . . substantive ways . . . even to have cake and ice cream you’ve gotta come up with money to buy all of that, and I think that was a huge obstacle.

Some staff attempted to offset the budget shortfalls by providing students with other no or low cost incentives that could easily be awarded in the classroom such as late homework passes and low test grade drop passes. Christian explained that he never quite

understood the point of the rewards other than to positively reinforce students' exhibiting the foundational character traits but he added, "I believe they have a place to some degree but at what point do you ween students, and staff for that matter, off expecting to get something for doing what they should be doing already." He went on to explain that he got the feeling that some staff began to "back off" implementation to some degree due to the reduced recognition that staff members received from the school's character committee and the administration. "Perhaps they didn't feel as though we appreciated their efforts. To me, our data said we appreciated everyone's work but maybe that wasn't enough to perpetuate the success we initially experienced" (Christian Carlson, Administrator).

### **Increased Students' Character Building Engagement . . .**

Ryan and Bohlin (2001) expressed five categories of ideas of how to engage students in the character building process in schools. The categories include:

- Building a Community of Virtue
- Mining the Curriculum
- Teachers, Administrators, and Staff
- Parents, the Primary Moral Educators
- Helping Students Take their Own Character Building Seriously (pp. 8–14).

When building a community of virtue, Ryan and Bohlin (2001) suggest "encourage[ing] students to identify a charity of in-school need, collect donations, and help administer the distribution of funds" (p. 9). The faculty, staff, and student body at BOA Middle made a conscious effort to advise the school community of needs that

existed within and outside the school by hosting canned food drives, clothing collections, and money collections for those impacted by natural disasters. Teachers allotted time during their classes to assist students in mapping a plan for distribution of the collections and donations that were made. In one case, over 1000 pounds of food was collected to give to a community shelter to feed the homeless and others misplaced through domestic violence.

Building a virtuous community can also be accomplished by “ensuring that school recognitions systems cover the areas of character and academics” and “use[ing] morning announcements, school/classroom bulletin boards, and/ or the school newsletter for the purpose of highlighting the various accomplishments—particularly ones which happen to be character oriented—of students and faculty members” (Ryan & Bohlin, 2001, p. 9). Over half of the study participants recalled the character and academic honor celebrations that occurred at the school during the three years. Jedi Warrior remembered the assemblies in which students and staff were recognized for their accomplishments in exhibiting the good character throughout the school and/or meeting academic standards such as the A or AB honor roll. Students who had been “caught doing good” received Panther dollars for their efforts and were invited to the character assemblies at which cake and ice cream were provided for them. Students who earned five or more Panther dollars were inducted into the Panther Club which was an honor because some students might not have made the A/B honor roll but were recognized for contributing to the good of BOA Middle. Participants advised that convening the character and honor roll



assemblies concurrently reminded students what maintaining their good character could produce and that was good grades.

Every participant recalled the enthusiasm with which character was portrayed throughout the school through the morning announcements and bulletin boards. Olivia Jones, Zach Mergner, and Abigail Adams referenced matrices that were posted throughout the building that detailed what the character expectations were based on a student's location in the building. For instance, character matrices were located in every classroom, bathroom, hallway, the cafeteria, and commons areas. Students and staff alike were to model the expectations within the appropriate area; however, though the matrices were not all-inclusive of the four character traits BOA Middle endorsed through its program, they were transferrable to other locations in the building. If someone modeled responsibility in the cafeteria by removing their trash from the cafeteria after breakfast and lunch, they should also show that same responsibility if they observed trash in the hallway regardless of whether or not the hallway matrix depicted responsibility as a trait for that location. Banners and bulletin boards displayed students' names or copies of awards they had received for exhibiting outstanding character throughout the school by maintaining the foundational character traits. Students also had the opportunity to recognize staff who they felt were meeting appropriate character expectations within the school.

Ryan and Bohlin (2001) propose another approach to engage students in the character building process by embedding discussions of character traits within curricula within the school. They call this approach "mining the curriculum" (p. 10). They

support “build[ing] empathy in English and social studies classes by teaching children to ‘put themselves in the shoes’ of the people they are reading about and studying” (p. 11). The authors here are alluding to the importance of a positive character discussion being embedded into the curriculum—a concept that also emerged during the data collection and analysis process.

Winnie Uzzell, Karen Kohl, Lady T, Michelle Marsh, and Zach Mergner suggested that the only way for character development to make a difference across the whole school environment was for it to be infused with curriculum. Zach said,

. . . it was obvious when it was stated this will be a school of character, but then it was woven through the fabric . . . it’s tough to remove something like character from the curriculum when it’s part of the school fabric. Teachers taught facets of character, especially in certain subjects. I think of social studies where the teacher would help students think beyond themselves and that’s a lot of what developing and defining what character is . . . being able to see beyond yourself . . . discussing the impact of historical figures and their actions on history and how poor character or good character can change the face of the world . . .

McKay (2002) explained,

Character education is an integral part of the curriculum at all grade levels. Character traits are connected to the classroom lessons so that students see how a trait might figure into a story, be part of a science experiment, or affect them personally. These traits are part of the instruction of the day, in every class and every subject. (p. 47)

While the character development role of teachers, administrators, staff, and parents have been previously addressed in this study, what Ryan and Bohlin (2001) call “Helping students take their own character building seriously” has not been addressed in large detail. Participants throughout the study referred to how students began to manage

their interactions with their teachers and each other with a more inherent attention to displaying the foundational character traits of the BOA CE program. BOA Middle offered opportunities for students to think, feel, and do the business of character education by performing service learning tasks through strategic partnerships forged within the surrounding school community. Ryan and Bohlin (2001) also advised schools to “impress upon students that being a good student means more than academic success” (p. 14) which Christian Carlson recalled was a message that also had to be reiterated to everybody in the school community as well. He said,

There were some parents, staff, and students who felt that their students could do no wrong because they were ‘A’ or ‘A/B’ students, and that was a hard sentiment to get folks to abandon initially. Not to say that we were looking for the bad in people, but the reality is that we all do things that don’t particularly portray good character on a daily basis. I mean there’s even a scripture that says something about ‘all have sinned and come short of the glory . . .’ right? That’s all I’m saying. The only way for us to be better is to realize that we’re not perfect but constantly reach for it.

### **. . . But Not for All Students**

There were participants who observed that the character education program perhaps was not for all students citing that there were students who maintained consistently good behavior. Some teachers referred to these students as the “advanced students” while others called them “the average good kids” and advised they complained at times that the character education program was concentrated on “the bad kids.” However, this contradicts CEP (2009) that states, “. . . character education is . . . good education” (p. 3). One might inquire if good education is for everyone, and if it is, then

character education is good for everyone by default. There was a feeling that not enough measures were taken to recognize these students for their good deeds within the school.

Other participants referenced specific students who were quite academically solid students but consistently displayed characteristics inconsistent with the BOA CE program. They shared the dialogues that ensued with some parents regarding their children and the consensus that was reached in cases to consider the implications for having a great mind with flawed character traits. Many of these flaws are more pronounced when a child is in the company of their peers away from caring adults like their parents or teachers. Ryan and Bohlin (2001) submit that schools should help students understand, “Doing the ‘right thing’ is not always an easy choice, especially in the face of peer pressure. Students may need help seeing long-term consequences, and they may need the support of a responsible adult both before and after choices are made” (p. 15).

Administrators, several teachers, and support staff in the study shared their frustrations of seeing the positive character potential in students but having what they referred to as the “one to three percent” of students who, despite their best efforts, did not appear to internalize the full range of the foundational character traits embraced by the BOA Middle program. Ryan and Bohlin (2001) offer a strategy for the frustrations that might be experienced while on the implementation journey associated with any character development initiatives stating, “Remind students and yourself that character building is not an easy or one-time project. Fashioning our character is the work of a lifetime” (p. 15). Others involved in character education research support the commitment of time

necessary for producing desired results through implementing character education programs (Elias, 2013; Kristjánsson, 2013; J. S. Leming & Yendol-Hoppey, 2004).

Study participants' comments resonated with these researcher's insight regarding the time that can be required to implement character development initiatives in any setting. Transforming oneself, their foundational character principles, and subsequently a specific environment is arduous and time-consuming. Before embarking on such a journey, consideration must be given to the implied commitment that will be required to be successful. Allison Boyd explained, "... if you don't see that positive happening right away, you have a tendency to start questioning yourself, 'Why is this not still happening?' well it's because you have to take the time and you've got to see the importance of that." Seemingly insurmountable roadblocks inevitably present themselves; however, the dividends reaped from such an implementation journey far outweigh the time spent to get there.

### **Summary**

This chapter reported the findings based on the stories and perceptions from nineteen participants. The interviews of these participants coupled with the review of a variety of documents from the school during implementation provided a rich data set from which several themes emerged that addressed the central research question: How did the three-year implementation of an exemplary character education program contribute to school improvement at a middle school that was recognized for its exemplary character education program? The themes were as follows:

- Character is Multidimensional
- Character Education is 24/7/365
- Implementation requires consistency
- CE fosters school improvement as Adults Lead and Students Achieve
- School communities can support character education through Collaboration, Service Learning, and Reflection.

Participants shared their true-to-life insight that was authentic and rich in nature regarding the influence of implementing an exemplary character education program at BOA Middle School and its contribution to the school's improvement.

In Chapter V, I will discuss what I have learned through the research process. I will also provide insightful reflections, recommendations, and conclusions for current and aspiring educators in the hopes of inspiring educational leaders at all levels to embrace character education programming at educational institutions.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND REFLECTIONS**

The implementation of character education programs in schools has the power to transform school communities in which teaching and learning occur more effectively and student achievement experiences considerable increases through stakeholder collaborations (CEP, 2009; McKay, 2002; Ryan & Bohlin, 2001). This study describes the perceived impact the implementation of a character education program had on improvement in BOA Middle School over a three-year implementation process from 2007 to 2010. The study also endorses the use of character education in schools that promote positive outcomes for the school's overall atmosphere from students to staff and parents. This chapter will describe recommendations for additional research and actions based on the study findings. In addition, the chapter will provide my personal reflections about the sentiments experienced during this study.

This research used a qualitative interview study. The study investigated stakeholder perceptions regarding the implementation of an exemplary character education program in a middle school and its implications for school improvement. This method of research warrants the inclusion of participants' experiences and how they experienced them as they were involved in the implementation process of the program.

The individual participants held distinct recollections of their experiences at BOA Middle School from 2007 to 2010. As data collection progressed, I was able to capture

the participant perceptions of how they felt the implementation of the exemplary character education program worked to create an environment at BOA Middle that was conducive to teaching and learning in the school. The BOA Character Education (CE) Program began with an assessment of the school's status in which there were numerous in and out of school suspensions, high teacher turnover, lack of parental involvement coupled with parents transferring their children out of the school, and the threat of reconstitution by the state due to substandard student performance.

The school adopted common embedded character traits that would become the foundation to address each of these areas based on the assessment. Through these foundational character traits, the program offered its constituents opportunities for thinking, feeling, and doing character, and this, consequently, lead to collaborative partnerships within the school that spread into the outside school community. As a result of the BOA CE Program, student achievement increased while incidents of discipline and the teacher turnover rate decreased. In addition, the threat of state reconstitution was eliminated while parent involvement and collaboration within the school grew to proportions not experienced at the school in years. Over a three-year period of exemplary character education program implementation from 2007 to 2010, BOA Middle experienced reductions in its out-of-school suspensions by over 65%, reduced teacher turnover from 33% to 11%, was named a PCS district Highly Enhanced School, met 29 of 29 academic targets, was named a Positive Behavior Intervention Support Model School for the state due to its character education program, experienced high growth as



determined by student achievement and state accountability data, and met federal accountability growth standards.

### **Presentation of the Research Questions**

This qualitative interview research study intended to investigate stakeholder perceptions regarding the implementation of an exemplary character education in a middle school and its implications for school improvement. Collected and analyzed data addressed the following central research question:

- How did the three-year implementation of an exemplary character education program contribute to school improvement at a middle school that was recognized for its exemplary character education program?

The following research questions were explored to create a more succinct description of stakeholder perceptions regarding the character education implementation at the school:

- How do adult stakeholders who participated in the implementation of an exemplary middle school character education program define character and character education and describe their significance?
- How do adult stakeholders who participated in the implementation of an exemplary middle school character education program explain the development of values and moral codes through the character education program?
- How do adult stakeholders who participated in the implementation of an exemplary middle school character education program construct the influence

of the character education program on overall middle school culture and climate?

- How do adult stakeholders who participated in the implementation of an exemplary middle school character education program describe and critique the influence of the character education program on their own attitudes and practices and those of others?
- How do adult stakeholders who participated in the implementation of an exemplary middle school character education program appraise and critique the principles, actions, and consequences that were essential to success and obstacles in implementation?

Data for these questions were collected and investigated through a series of face to face interviews and document analyses that were designed to detail stakeholder perceptions regarding the influence of character education implementation in the middle school. The participants' perceptions were captured as a result of their involvement in the three-year implementation of the character education program. Aggregate school records, including in-school and out-of-school suspension data, teacher turnover data, and student achievement data were reviewed to develop a snapshot of the impact of character education implementation during the three-year span. The central research question was addressed through the collection of participant interviews and document analysis. As the data was analyzed, multiple themes manifested. They were as follows:

- Character is Multidimensional
- Character Education is 24/7/365

- Implementation requires consistency
- CE fosters school improvement as Adults Lead and Students Achieve
- School communities can support character education through Collaboration, Service Learning, and Reflection.

### **Definition/Description of Character/Character Education and Their Significance**

Research question 1 prompted study participants to share their thoughts regarding what character and character education is to them. Definitions of character were related specifically to what a person does, particularly when others are not around or looking at them. In addition, one's character is defined by how the individual wants others to view them and this can be dependent on one's given situation. Though character definitions varied to some degree, all participants agreed that one's character can be positive or negative and is a representation of one's moral compass, and given the significant challenges with which BOA Middle had been confronted, it was what was needed at the school. The multidimensional nature of one's character was evidenced by the participants' varied views. Consequently, there is no mistaking that character, like the air we breathe, is always around and can facilitate or prohibit one's success in his or her life pursuits.

Asked to describe their thoughts about character education, participants raised the idea that CE is used to cultivate any number of character traits including responsibility, respect, caring, trustworthiness, and perseverance in a school community including staff and students. Participants gained an awareness of their own character through the implementation process as character education's overarching reach offers the opportunity

for an individual's reflective introspection of their own operations. The majority of the participants referred to the significance of teaching and more importantly modeling the character traits that their character education program represented. They alluded to the potential for a hypocritical example that is portrayed when one subscribes to a "do as I say and not as I do" attitude. In summation, the reality is that CE is ever-present because it is always occurring 24 hours per day, seven days per week, and 365 days of the year. The ultimate question becomes "Is the character education you're teaching worth learning?" If it is, teach it with consistency like your hair is on fire.

### **Development of Values and Moral Codes**

The findings of this research confirm the beneficial aspects that are associated with implementing an exemplary CE program at any school. Researchers in the field of character development report the benefits associated with character education, and this information was discussed in the literature review as well as the results and findings chapters of this work.

Research question 2 prompted participants to share the impact of CE program implementation on the development of values and moral codes within the school. Study participants shared that the values and moral codes through the BOA CE Program were developed based on feedback regarding the issues the school was experiencing. Foundational character traits that were grounded in the Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education (CEP, 2009) served as the underpinnings of the BOA program. The traits were clearly communicated through an intentional and consistent character message

that was embedded in character education lessons delivered daily in the morning during the advisor/advisee period.

The character program also embedded positive language into school operations through venues such as the school morning show broadcast in which the “Panther Pledge” was recited by staff and students. Staff began to consider their verbal interactions with students and each other that would frame a more positive dialogue within the school community. Brooks and Kann (1993) suggest, “. . . common negative language such as ‘Don’t be late’ or ‘Don’t forget your pencil’ should be translated into explicit positive language as in ‘Be on time’ or ‘Be prepared’” (p. 20). Staff learned that these types of minor adjustments in their language could yield major benefits for their relationships with students and cultivate an educational environment that would lead to school improvement.

CEP (2009) supports such practices in which “Core ethical and performance values actively guide every aspect of life in the school” (p. 2) and serve as the foundation of good character for all involved. Honor roll assemblies coupled with positive character recognitions for students and staff, an initiative endorsed by Ryan and Bohlin (2001), presented opportunities for the school community to witness real time outcomes of the character program implementation successes. The efforts of the character development team at the school created what Brooks and Kann (1993) call “. . . an advertising campaign intended to keep the words, concepts, and behaviors learned in class at the forefront of students’ attention” (p. 20).

The development of the codes and values that would guide the BOA CE program required the consistency of the adults modeling the traits in which the program was grounded. Just as character education was and is a full-time endeavor so was the implementation of the BOA program. The consistency of implementation strategies that were employed generated profound benefits to the school community through the cultivation of a teaching and learning environment that had not been experienced for a while at the school.

### **Improved BOA Middle Culture and Climate**

Research question 3 was developed to gain an understanding of participants' opinions about the improvement of the BOA Middle School culture and climate during the years of the program implementation. All of the study participants agreed that the school environment was not conducive to teaching and learning prior to implementing the CE program. When asked to describe the climate of the school before, one participant said, "It was chaos." Another participant exclaimed, ". . . the middle school was hell on wheels!"

The impact of the building administration, particularly the school's principal, was instrumental in the success of implementation during this three-year period. Berkowitz and Bier (2004) and CEP (2000) confirmed the importance of a school leader's embodiment of a skillset conducive to creating a character education driven environment in the school setting. The principal's ability to lead the character charge created an example for adults and students to follow and exhibit in their interactions with each other. The CE implementation process created a positive shift in the school's environment in

that it became more conducive to teaching and learning compared to before. The shift was due to factors such as a consolidated effort by the school community to work together to accomplish a common goal—an improved educational environment in which staff, students, and parents held each other accountable for prosocial and academic gains.

Lickona et al. (2003) and Miller (2012) refer to the importance of ensuring that all the adults involved in educating students including school staff and parents need to engage the character education process. This process transcends the halls of the school building and progresses into the homes and neighborhoods of the students. The challenge of engaging parents and students outside the school was noted; however, it was not impossible when adequate communication between the school and home took place regarding the character traits and lessons being taught at a given time at the school. This allowed parents to become active partners with the school in the process even if they did not regularly attend school events due to evening obligations.

Decreased disciplinary incidents coupled with corresponding increases in student achievement marked the three-year implementation process. Aggregate school discipline data during the three-year implementation process (school years 2007/08, 2008/09, and 2009/10) revealed continual decreases in the number of discipline referrals (incidents) received—1220, 991, and 710, respectively. This translated to fewer students being in or out-of-school suspended. The school year 2006/07 posted 557 out-of-school suspensions while Year 1 character program implementation presented a 34% reduction in these instances. Over the three years, in-school suspensions decreased from 1401 to 639—a

54% decrease. Over the same period, out-of-school suspensions declined from 557 to 194—a 65% decrease.

Student achievement data rose in each of the measured subgroups as depicted in Tables 2 and 3. Due to the renorming of the reading tests during the implementation period, all reading data during the three years was not available; however, all math data was available for the same period. BOA Middle students experienced substantial increases during the implementation. The exemplary BOA CE Program created opportunities for school staff to teach more fervently and students more opportunities for learning. Students engaged the learning process more as they embraced their academic performance as a function of their character in and out of school. Character traits such as perseverance, care, responsibility, and respect were consistently communicated to students in regards to their school work.

It became obvious during the three-year implementation of the program that as the adults lead the charge for character development in the school, the school environment became more conducive to good teaching and learning. Teachers no longer had to be the discipline police but emerged as the educational leaders that they endeavored to be. The subsequent result was the double-digit increases in the achievement of the students at BOA Middle. When the school staff and parents led the students achieved.

### **Adult/Student Attitudes and Practices**

Research question 4 focused on the implementation process and its influence on staff attitudes and practices and those of others. During the course of the three-year process, more collaboration occurred between the adults associated with educating the



students. Teachers, support staff, administrators, and parents joined forces to benefit the BOA Middle School community. Because of the past issues within the school from minor code of conduct violations such as skipping and cheating to major violations such as drugs, fighting, and assaults, teacher participants were obligated to maintain a level of safety in their classrooms which was reportedly difficult prior to implementation. The frequently antagonistic atmosphere within the school environment prohibited stakeholders from working together in many cases. Throughout the 2007–2010 implementation period, study participants developed a more reflective capacity with which they assessed their own contribution to the negativity that existed within the school. In addition, they also investigated professional development opportunities that would facilitate their own character development in conjunction with the BOA program.

A BOA atmosphere in which disparaging interactions subsided gave rise to a sense of commitment to incorporate character initiatives into the curriculum through service learning activities. Staff and students investigated the needs of the surrounding communities the school served as they embraced the civic responsibility associated with character education. The Corporation for National Service (as cited in Billig, 2000) suggests the growth and development of participants' [character] through engagement in service which meets the following criteria:

- The service is conducted in and meets the needs of a community;
- The service is coordinated with an elementary school, secondary school, institution of higher education, or community service program and with the community;
- The service helps to foster civic responsibility;

- The service is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum of the students, or the educational components of the community-service program in which the participants are enrolled; and
- The service provides structured items for the students or participants to reflect on service experience. (p. 659)

Anderson (1998) supported incorporating service activities into academic curricula stating, “. . . service learning involves a blending of service activities with the academic curriculum in order to address real community needs while students learn through active engagement” (p. 9). Students became vested in their education as their civic obligation to help others preceded “me, myself, and I” and developed meaningful relationships and partnerships with adults who genuinely concerned with their success. Many students ultimately pursued service-related professions in post-secondary studies or immediately upon high school graduation.

The collaboration, service learning, and reflective spirit that engulfed BOA Middle during the CE program implementation created a supportive school community that rallied around its children. Parents and teachers, teachers and students, and administrators and teachers all embraced the positive contributions each other brought to the table of school improvement through character education.

### **Implementation Essentials/Pitfalls**

Research question 5 was developed to explore participants’ insight regarding the essentials that garner CE program implementation success and the pitfalls that can accompany the process as well. The administrative team, in particular the school principal, was the unwavering front runner for implementation success. The principal, with the assistance of other school leaders comprised of the Character Development

Team, ensured that staff and students interactions exhibited the four character traits that were the foundation of the BOA program. Brenda Bostic alluded to having the right mix of individuals supporting the implementation saying, “It rises and falls on the people that are involved. You have to have the right mix and you really have to have the right leadership.” The school community excelled during the three years from 2007 to 2010 because the staff was reassured of the administration’s commitment to character excellence. Gruenert and Whitaker (2015) explained, “. . . leadership makes all the difference” (p. 163).

The converse of the trendsetting school principal’s involvement in implementation was the progressive decline of implementation when the principal was transferred to another school. The new school leader brought different goals and focus for the school that was accompanied by different strategies for reaching them. Staff felt the initiative instituted beginning with the 2010/11 school year did not provide the previous security they had once experienced as this was due to a change the new leader’s focus. In addition, new teaching staff at the school had not been privy to the strategies employed that led to BOA success through character development and consequently, did not harbor the same admiration for it as their colleagues who had participated in the implementation.

A majority of BOA staff maintained the increased morale the school experienced through the CE program implementation. Fineman (1999) states, “Morale has distinct emotional overtones: The feelings of attachment or belonging that a person has to a workgroup and his or her sense of commitment to the group task and spirit” (p. 290).

Staff felt better just coming to work feeling like they would make a difference because everyone seemed to be on one accord with regard to character education. Incidentally, some participants reported the lack of commitment of other staff to embrace character due the dwindling focus on character with the arrival of new school staff, including the principal.

Students' engagement in their own character building increased through measures BOA employed that were consistent with five categories suggested by Ryan and Bohlin (2001):

- Building a Community of Virtue
- Mining the Curriculum
- Teachers, Administrators, and Staff
- Parents, the Primary Moral Educators
- Helping Students Take their Own Character Building Seriously (pp. 8–14).

Each measure included its own set of strategies to foster conditions for success as it was employed by the school community. These strategies have been discussed in detail in Chapter IV.

Despite the growth experienced by the school, particularly its students, some staff reported the character program did not do enough to engage all students in the process. They advised there were students who were already “good kids” or “advanced.” These students felt the program did nothing to acknowledge them for making positive contributions to the school by default by already being good. To some degree, a sense of resentment may have presented itself despite the improvement the school experienced.

Finally, all participants agreed that the implementation of the BOA Middle CE Program required time to see the results that all hoped would occur. The general tendency to abandon an idea because results do not manifest right away can lead to more frustration and lead to an environment that is worse than when the character initiatives started. Various researchers (Elias, 2013; Kristjánsson, 2013; J. S. Leming & Yendol-Hoppey, 2004) support the commitment of time necessary for producing desired results through implementing character education programs. While no amount of time is specified in research, a direct relationship exists between implementation success and the school community associated with the process (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Lickona, 1996; Ryan & Bohlin, 2001).

### **Connections to the Conceptual Framework**

The BOA Middle CE Program was developed by condensing the Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education to three main facets that would comprise the program. The first included obtaining feedback from the school stakeholders and then developing common character traits that would govern the operations of the school. The next facet involved cultivating collaborative partnerships within the school community that would work to not only perpetuate the CE program but that would also make conditions more conducive to the development of lasting positive relationships. As the school community worked together, opportunities for thinking, feeling, and doing character-related activities, the third facet of the program, presented themselves as service learning initiatives cropped up across the campus.

The CE program at BOA Middle led to remarkable improvements in the school. First, the teaching and learning environment in the school became one in which teachers became more reflective practitioners who no longer resorted to condescending interactions with children. Instead, they used positive language and worked with parents to help students succeed. The teachers were no longer considered the discipline police but took their rightful places as the instructional facilitators they were destined to be. Next, because the teaching and learning environment improved, disciplinary incidents decreased because the students felt as though they were part of something great. The students began to take ownership for their school work by relating their character to their effort in learning the state-mandated curriculum. This cultivated an attitude that failure was not an option at the school, and everyone rallied around the students to ensure that they excelled without excuses.

A reduction in disciplinary incidents meant that students remained in school more regularly in a much improved learning community. They engaged the curriculum through the instruction of teachers they felt cared about their success and expected their academic and prosocial excellence. As a result, students posted double-digit increases on their state tests and met the then federal adequate yearly progress accountability standards meeting 29 of 29 goals. This accomplishment represented a considerable reason for celebration as the school was recognized as a Highly Enhanced School in the PCS school district.

Lastly, the 33% teacher turnover rate that had been experienced prior to the implementation of the CE program was lessened to only 11%. Teachers not only wanted

to be in the classroom, but they wanted to be in the classrooms at BOA Middle. They became elated to be in a place where they felt like they were making a difference in their own lives but more importantly, in the lives of their students. There was no mistaking the intent with which teachers performed their duties. They began to internalize that their goal was to increase their students' intelligence and their character by working with parents to develop young people that were both academically sound and morally good.

### **Recommendations for School Principals**

This research study validates much of what the literature has stated regarding the influence that character education and development can have on school improvement. There is a misconception amongst school leaders that there is too little time to invest in initiatives aimed at developing character within students and school staff due to educational mandates to teach the academic curriculum. As a school principal, I recognize the significance of maintaining high academic standards, but I concur with Chris Peterson (as cited in M. A. White & Waters, 2015) who advised that schools should be enabling institutions that he called “‘Good Schools’ . . . that foster academic excellence whilst also contributing to moral fulfillment . . .” (p. 69). As such, I propose school principals take the leading role and be the change agent for character development within their respective schools. They should work with the school leadership team comprised of teachers, parents, school support staff, and students to determine the current status of their school and then determine what character traits in which their character initiatives will be grounded.

Next, I recommend the principal ensure that the district leadership is aware of the intent of the character building activities to garner their support. It will be important to have data to suggest the implications that such initiatives can have on the teaching and learning environment within the school. The principal should also identify lead staff within the school that can serve as a character team whose job it will be to amass resources to construct character development lessons for staff members. The teachers should deliver the character instruction to students with a built in reflection component that all staff are responsible to complete in the hopes of cultivating a consistent contemplation of their interactions within the school environment and abroad.

Lastly, I recommend the principal ensure that adequate time is built into the school schedule to ensure that time is allotted each day for the character instruction. This should not be left to teachers to determine as the principal has to set the character tone and pulse within the building. He/she must be the “Character King/Queen” leading by example and setting the benchmark for school operations based on the agreed upon foundational character traits.

### **Recommendations for School Districts**

Local Education Agencies (LEAs) have an even greater responsibility to ensure that conditions within the district are conducive to the character development of its children. Equipping students with necessary skills to lead lifestyles that engage them in challenging academic curricula in character-rich environments should be a consuming mission for districts. Test scores are not always an accurate measure of students’ character strengths; however, the value of student involvement in schools providing



character development opportunities exceeds the investment. The process alone can produce physically and emotionally healthy children who evoke the changes they want to experience in society from the time they enter school.

As a result of the potential for character education initiatives to educate the whole child and lead to everything from children's increased resolve to accomplish long-term goals like graduation and post-secondary education to reductions in risky youth behaviors, I recommend that school districts make character education a priority in their schools. Service learning is an excellent way to foster character education and civic engagement not just in students but also in school staff. The service activities should be incorporated into the curricular standards offered at the schools. This practice has been supported extensively in the research (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Chung & McBride, 2015; Coble, 2014). District character coaches could be utilized to facilitate character development and service learning trainings for school staff using a train the trainer model in which school representatives take the information back to their respective schools to train lead teachers. They can work within their schools to develop additional resources for school staff to share successful strategies with other colleagues and solicit parental support as well.

Furthermore, service opportunities should be provided for district and school staff as well as students during non-school hours. For example, districts could collaborate with community and faith-based organizations to provide all school stakeholders with opportunities to sharpen their character development skills while simultaneously servicing their society. I also recommend that districts develop rubrics for schools based

on common foundational character traits that have been agreed upon by a host of district, community, and even corporate partners. The rubrics could be used to assess and recognize school-based character initiatives that are aligned with the common traits for the district. Students and teachers epitomizing the integration of academic mastery and character growth could be recognized as well for their positive contributions to their individual schools and communities.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This research uncovered marked decreases in incidents of student discipline which translated to fewer office referrals, in-school suspension, and out-of-school suspensions. The perception of CE program implementation and reduced inappropriate behaviors is noteworthy; however, future research should include a longitudinal, comparative study that investigates the impact of character education along school feeder patterns. In other words, a comparative analysis of discipline data for feeder zone A Elementary, B Middle, and C High School which implement character development from grades K through 12 can be compared against a comparable feeder zone pattern of D Elementary, E Middle, and F High School that do not subscribe to a character program implementation. The data can suggest the influence of character development initiatives on similar components, outlined in this study, throughout their primary and secondary education. In addition, the research described above could also consider the graduation rates of the students who matriculated through the feeder zones to determine if character implementation has any impact on the rates at which students graduate from high school.

Another area of research along the lines of the study mentioned above could include speaking not only with the adult stakeholders but also the students. Students' perceptions of the character initiatives on themselves can be investigated and perhaps provide a clearer picture of which character traits might be more specific to students' personal and academic growth. The investigation could be done simultaneously at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. A distinction might emerge that casts a light on certain character traits that might take precedence at specified developmental pathways of the students involved and is dependent on their respective grade levels.

Lastly, there are LEAs across the United States that have been designated as Districts of Character. School districts that have similar student and staff demographic, socio-economic, and achievement characteristics could be studied. Comparisons and contrasts can be drawn to determine what character implementation strategies these LEAs have employed that lead to their designation—District of Character. The superintendents of these districts as well as their supporting leadership staff can provide data to confirm or deny the success of their respective district's character building projects. Strategies that foster the districts' character successes can be detailed to other districts in the hopes of spreading the character education agenda nationally and internationally.

### **Researcher Reflections about the Study**

When I initially embarked on this expeditionary research study, I was under the impression that everything I would hear would be in staunch support for character education and everyone would state nothing but positive things about our implementation

process from 2007 to 2010. I was completely wrong, thus the reason I referred to this work as expeditionary. It truly was a roller coaster type journey.

This research process forced me to consider my own thoughts about character development and the influence that such a practice can have on school improvement. I also found myself analyzing, in more detail, the way in which we implemented the character education program at BOA Middle. I experienced great rewards listening to former colleagues of mine who had worked to realize many of the successes that our school experienced during the three-year process. Because of the perseverance that was required to realize the benefits of our character program at BOA Middle, I reflected back to my mother's example during the adverse situation in which we found ourselves in that department store when I was a new teenager. Her perseverance to continue shopping and make me "stick it out" with her as well resonated with me during our implementation process because it was not always easy. There were times when I, as the principal, wanted to give someone a piece of my mind but the voices of my father, mother, and words of Jesus Christ always seemed to bridle my tongue. The vitriol with which I might have interacted with a teacher, parent, or student might have perpetuated the "hot bed" that had been described to me as I entered BOA as the new principal in July of 2007. Having exercised considerable leadership and ownership in the BOA CE Program, I had to lead by example and rally others to do the same as our goal was to produce conditions in which our school community could teach, learn, and grow personally and academically.

I must admit that I was somewhat disheartened by other colleagues' responses who did not seem to recall what a majority of the participants did—a great time of academic and personal growth and the transformation of the teaching and learning environment in our school community. As a former principal at BOA Middle, this challenged my thinking about what we could have done differently. I found myself assessing the process all over again. One minute I felt great about it and the next minute I was asking myself, “What if we'd done this or that?” However, fond memories of the times past presented the opportunity for more in depth discussions about how character development can be realized in all schools.

More than anything, this research study made me more aware of how school improvement can be accomplished for children, parents, teachers, and administrators through character education, and it also compelled me to delve deeper into ways that might garner more support for character education beyond the district level.

The member checking phase of this research process was one of the most interesting portions of the data collection/analysis phase of this research. It presented me with the chance to verify if what was transcribed from the audio recordings was what participants recalled of their respective interviews. Many participants were amazed at the wealth of information they had provided during their interviews. Some even remarked, “I said all this?” in disbelief that their transcripts were so lengthy. Others wanted to clarify comments they had made as they did not want their thoughts misconstrued. I did remind them that pseudonyms were being used for the study. I also jokingly advised

them that if their thoughts were negatively misinterpreted I would be the only one who knew their real name and would be the only one who thought poorly of them.

As I contemplate my dissertation experience, I enjoyed the opportunity to reminisce with former colleagues and a former parent from BOA Middle School. I believe the interviews were the best way to collect their perceptual data regarding the contribution to school improvement that was cultivated by our character education program implementation. I do wish that I had had more former parents participate in the study because I wanted to hear from them in more detail regarding the comparisons of how they perceived BOA when their older children had attended there before the program came online. Nonetheless, I realized that the data from those within the trenches—the teachers, support staff, and administrators—helped to paint the perceptual picture of what BOA Middle accomplished and the school improvement that was realized from 2007 to 2010 through the BOA Character Education Program.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative interview study gave me the chance to gather perceptual data and learn from participants who had been instrumental in the implementation of an exemplary character education program. The BOA Middle CE Program had the Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education (CEP, 2009) as its foundation. The research process from the literature review to the data collection and analysis has helped me to expand my comprehension of the influence that the implementation of character education programs can have on school improvement. In addition, the findings from this study support the need for character development to be a priority in schools as incidents of youth risk

behaviors increases (CDC, 2010; R. Davidson, 2009; Erickson, 2010). Peterson (as cited in M. A. White & Waters, 2014) believed that schools should work to alleviate these risk behaviors, but he admonished schools to implement systematic practices that would promote character building and student well-being.

The CEP (2009) advises, “Good character education . . . is good education” (p. 3). Implementing character education initiatives in school must be done with intentionality. However, the first order entails the adults within the school building reflecting on their own character development and dealings with each other and their students. Successful implementation also requires the concerted efforts of not just school staff but parents and the community as well. The proverbial village becomes the catalyst for creating conditions in which children witness caring adults modeling the character traits that can lead to the transformation of a school community and foster school improvement.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**EMAIL RECRUITMENT SCRIPT**

Greetings, Mr./Ms. \_\_\_\_\_

I am Johncarlos Miller, former principal of BOA Middle School and current doctoral student at UNCG, and I am conducting a study on adult stakeholder perceptions of the influence of character education implementation in middle school and its contribution to school improvement. This study is part of my research for my doctoral degree program of study.

The study will examine what you perceive to be the influence of character education implementation on middle school improvement. Does it or can it make a difference? I sincerely want to hear your thoughts on this as you have been identified as someone who may have valuable insight.

If you are willing to participate, all I need from you is an opportunity to interview you at an agreed location, preferably the school. I will be more than happy to accommodate your schedule in the morning, afternoon, or evening. The interview will take no more than 60 minutes of your time.

Should you have questions, feel free to contact me via the following:

Email: [REDACTED]  
Phone: 336-451-6344

I hope that you will agree to take part in this study, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Best regards,

Johncarlos M. Miller

Approved IRB  
9/17/14

**APPENDIX B**  
**TELEPHONE RECRUITMENT SCRIPT**

Hey, Mr./Ms. \_\_\_\_\_

I am Johncarlos Miller, former principal of BOA Middle School and current doctoral student at UNCG, and I am conducting a study on adult stakeholder perceptions of the influence of character education implementation in middle school and its contribution to school improvement. This study is part of my research for my doctoral degree program of study.

The study will examine what you perceive to be the influence of character education implementation in middle school and its contribution to school improvement. Does it or can it make a difference? I sincerely want to hear your thoughts on this as you have been identified as someone who may have valuable insight.

If you are willing to participate, all I need from you is an opportunity to interview you at an agreed location, preferably the school. I will be more than happy to accommodate your schedule in the morning, afternoon, or evening. The interview will take no more than 60 minutes of your time.

Again I'd love to hear what you have to say on this subject. Can I schedule you for an interview? Do you have any additional questions for me?

Thank you.

Approved IRB  
**9/17/14**

**APPENDIX C**  
**WORD-OF-MOUTH RECRUITMENT SCRIPT**

Hey, Mr./Ms. \_\_\_\_\_

Johncarlos Miller, former principal of BOA Middle School and current doctoral student at UNCG, is conducting a study on adult stakeholder perceptions of the influence of character education implementation in middle school and its contribution to school improvement.

This study is part of his research for his doctoral degree program of study.

The study will examine what you perceive to be the influence of character education implementation on middle school improvement during the three-year implementation. Did it make a difference and lead to school improvement? He would love to hear your thoughts on this as he feels you can provide valuable insight.

If you are willing to participate, all he needs to do is schedule a 60 minute (or less) interview with you at an agreed location, preferably the school. He'll be more than happy to accommodate your schedule in the morning, afternoon, or evening.

If you'd like to provide your valuable insight and help our former principal in this study, please contact him at either of the following:

Email: [REDACTED]  
Phone: 336-370-8282

Thanks!

Approved IRB  
9/17/14

**APPENDIX D**  
**RECRUITMENT FOLLOW UP LETTER**

Dear Mr./Ms. \_\_\_\_\_,

I am grateful that you agreed to provide your insight as part of my doctoral degree study on influence of character education in middle school and its contribution to school improvement. As a reminder, the specifics regarding your interview are as follows:

Date: Time: Location:

As an additional reminder, the interview will take no more than 60 minutes of your time. If you have additional questions for me or if anything changes, you can reach me in the following ways:

Email: \_\_\_\_\_  
Phone: 336-451-6344

Thank you again and I look forward to seeing you on \_\_\_\_\_ at  
\_\_\_\_\_ o'clock.

Sincerely,

Johncarlos M. Miller

Approved IRB  
**9/17/14**

## APPENDIX E

### CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT

#### CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT

Project Title: Investigating Adult Stakeholder Perceptions on the Influence of Character Education Implementation on a Middle School and Its Contribution to School Improvement

Principal Investigator and Faculty Advisor (if applicable): Johncarlos M. Miller / Dr. Carl Lashley

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

#### **What are some general things you should know about research studies?**

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in the study is voluntary. You may choose not to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. There may not be any direct benefit to you for being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies. If you choose not to be in the study or leave the study before it is done, it will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Details about this study are discussed in this consent form. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form. If you have any questions about this study at any time, you should ask the researchers named in this consent form. Their contact information is below.

#### **What is the study about?**

This is a research project. Your participation is voluntary. This research study will investigate the influence of character education implementation in a middle school and its contribution to school improvement.

#### **Why are you asking me?**

Participants will be comprised of teachers, parents, school support staff, and administrators who were employed at or had children who attended BOA Middle School during the three-year implementation of an exemplary character education program.

Some of the participants may still be employed at the site or have children who currently attend the school.

**What will you ask me to do if I agree to be in the study?**

Participants of this study will participate in a personal interview lasting approximately one hour. Following the interview, the participant will be able to review transcriptions for clarity.

**Is there any audio/video recording?**

This will be an audio recorded interview. The research will keep all information confidential. However, because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the recording, your confidentiality for things you say on the recording cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will try to limit access to the recording as described below.

**What are the risks to me?**

The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants. Pseudonyms will be used for participants, schools, and school districts.

If you have questions, want more information or have suggestions, please contact John Carlos M. Miller at (336) 451-6344 or [REDACTED]. Dr. Carl Lashley, faculty advisor, may be reached at [carl.lashley@gmail.com](mailto:carl.lashley@gmail.com).

If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated, concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study please contact the Office of Research Integrity at UNCG toll-free at (855)-251-2351.

**Are there any benefits to society as a result of me taking part in this research?**

School leaders at all levels and the corresponding school stakeholders may benefit from an analysis of the data generated through this research.

**Are there any benefits to *me* for taking part in this research study?**

There are no direct benefits to participants in this study.

**Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?**

There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.

**How will you keep my information confidential?**

Information will be kept confidential by storage in a locked file cabinet at the home of John Carlos M. Miller, password protection, encryption, not identifying participants by name when data are disseminated. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

**What if I want to leave the study?**

You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state. The investigators also have the right to stop your participation at any time. This could be because you have had an unexpected reaction, or have failed to follow instructions, or because the entire study has been stopped.

**What about new information/changes in the study?**

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

**Voluntary Consent by Participant:**

By signing this consent form/completing this survey/activity (used for an IRB-approved waiver of signature) you are agreeing that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly willing consent to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By signing this form, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate, or have the individual specified above as a participant participate, in this study described to you by Johncarlos M. Miller.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX F

### UNCG IRB APPROVAL



**OFFICE OF RESEARCH INTEGRITY**  
 2718 Beverly Cooper Moore and Irene Mitchell Moore  
 Humanities and Research Administration Bldg.  
 PO Box 26170  
 Greensboro, NC 27402-6170  
 336.256.0253  
 Web site: [www.uncg.edu/orc](http://www.uncg.edu/orc)  
 Federalwide Assurance (FWA) #216

**To:** John Carlos Miller  
 Ed Ldrship and Cultural Found  
[jmmille3@uncg.edu](mailto:jmmille3@uncg.edu)

**From:** UNCG IRB

**Date:** 9/17/2014

**RE:** Notice of IRB Exemption

**Exemption Category:** 4.Existing data, public or deidentified, 2.Survey, interview, public observation

**Study #:** 14-0188

**Study Title:** Investigating Stakeholder Perceptions on the Influence of Character Education Implementation in a Middle School and Its Contribution to School Improvement

This submission has been reviewed by the IRB and was determined to be exempt from further review according to the regulatory category cited above under 45 CFR 46.101(b).

#### **Study Description:**

This research is a phenomenological case study of the influence of character education implementation in a Middle School and its contribution to school improvement. Given the troubling trends in today's youth (Pena et al., 2012; Dahlberg et al., 2006; Garofalo et al., 1998; Lickona, 1996) and their corresponding effects on school culture and climate, the purpose of this study is to investigate adult stakeholder perceptions of the influence of character education implementation in a middle school and its contribution to school improvement. This study will explore the implementation of strategies aimed at instilling character in students and whether they create a culture and climate conducive to teaching and learning in a middle school setting.

#### **Regulatory and other findings:**

- If your study is contingent upon approval from another site (REDACTED), you will need to submit a modification at the time you receive that approval.

#### **Investigator's Responsibilities**

Please be aware that any changes to your protocol must be reviewed by the IRB prior to being implemented. Please utilize the most recent and approved version of your consent form/information sheet when enrolling participants. The IRB will maintain records for this study for three years from the date of the original determination of exempt status.

Signed letters, along with stamped copies of consent forms and other recruitment materials will be scanned to you in a separate email. **Stamped consent forms must be used unless the IRB has**



**given you approval to waive this requirement.** Please notify the ORI office immediately if you have an issue with the stamped consents forms.

Please be aware that valid human subjects training and signed statements of confidentiality for all members of research team need to be kept on file with the lead investigator. Please note that you will also need to remain in compliance with the university "Access To and Retention of Research Data" Policy which can be found at [http://policy.uncg.edu/research\\_data/](http://policy.uncg.edu/research_data/).

CC:

Carl Lashley, Ed Ldrship and Cultural Found

**APPENDIX G**  
**PCS DISTRICT IRB APPROVAL**

September 30, 2014

Johncarlos Miller  
[REDACTED]

Re: 141512

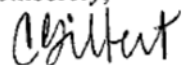
Dear Johncarlos Miller:

The [REDACTED] Research Review Committee has concluded that your proposal *Investigating Stakeholder Perceptions on the Influence of Character Education Implementation in a Middle School and Its Contribution to School Improvement* meets the requirements of state legislation and the current research policy of [REDACTED].

Committee approval does not guarantee access to schools or to individuals, nor does it imply that a study can or will be conducted. The school principal makes the final decision regarding the participation of the school in the research. Staff members and parents decide independently whether they wish to participate and they may withdraw at any time. Interviews will be conducted outside the instructional day. The committee expects that the identities of individuals, schools, and the district will remain anonymous throughout all stages of the project.

Please present this letter upon initial contact with the principal. Thank you.

Sincerely,



Carolyn Gilbert  
Co-Chair, Research Review Committee

## **APPENDIX H**

### **INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY**

The interview questions will be open-ended and indicate the topics to be covered in the interviews.

Rapport building questions:

- Tell me about the character education program at BOA during the period of 2007 to 2010.
  - What was your role in the program?
1. How would you define character?
  2. How would you define character education?
  3. What positive language did BOA Middle's character education program use to incorporate common core values such as respect, trustworthiness, fairness, and caring into the school routine?
  4. What artifacts existed in BOA Middle's character education program that visually reinforced expectations for students and staff?
  5. What was the extent of student participation in implementing the character education program?
  6. What components of BOA Middle's character education program do you think were incorporated into the school curriculum?
  7. What do you feel were the greatest obstacles of BOA Middle's character education program?

8. How do you think BOA Middle's character education program implementation affected adults/students connected to the school?
9. How was the school's culture and climate altered by BOA Middle's character education program implementation?
10. What was the extent of parent involvement in BOA Middle's character education program implementation?
11. What effects did BOA Middle's character education program have on discipline at the school?
12. How was student achievement impacted as a result of BOA Middle's character education program?
13. What do you wish other people knew about implementing the character education program at BOA Middle?
14. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding your thoughts on implementing the character education program at BOA Middle?

# APPENDIX I

## PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW NOTES

Pseudonym: CAM

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY

The interview questions will be open-ended and indicate the topics to be covered in the interviews.

### Rapport building questions:

- Tell me about the character education program at BOA during the period of 2007 to 2010. *Full school initiative x'ter ed comm. PD's for comm. Incentive program w/ students. New.*
- What was your role in the program? *Member of PBIS comm. & tchr. Drive it on team. Had full buy-in led incentives.*
- 1. How would you define character? *innermost quality of person. Can be ch'd. Person genuine personality. Its who u r*
- 2. How would you define character education? *Program to provide students w/ experiences... what their x'ter can be.*
- 3. What positive language did BOA Middle's character education program use to incorporate common core values such as respect, trustworthiness, fairness, and caring into the school routine? *went towards what we wanted to see. Matrices for areas RR, assembly, class, commons.*
- 4. What artifacts existed in BOA Middle's character education program that visually reinforced expectations for students and staff? *Matrix for each area. Banners posted when x'ter awards won. X'ter awards to students.*
- 5. What was the extent of student participation in implementing the character education program? *Surveys re: their input for incentives.*
- 6. What components of BOA Middle's character education program do you think were incorporated into the school curriculum? *pushed x'ter in advisory. lessons that were x'ter related 1st 2 wks to month of school.*
- 7. What do you feel were the greatest obstacles of BOA Middle's character education program? *Tchr buy-in Affordable options for incentives. If you're excited it goes into students. Lack of consistency w/ incentives by students.*
- 8. How do you think BOA Middle's character education program implementation affected adults/students connected to the school? *Adults (parents) - saw validity in program. Translated good behavior to home. Students enjoyed it. Values @ home. Staff - 68% had grd buy-in & good success. 68% winning ppl over. School of Excellence award. Coordinates of effort @ helm.*

9. How was the school's culture and climate altered by BOA Middle's character education program implementation? *in a +ve way. Hired due to chx's. BIG EHX. community (good quote) feel family feel. trending on the net.*
10. What was the extent of parent involvement in BOA Middle's character education program implementation? *Strong parental involvement in programs. PTA chair believe in program. Definitely parental involvement to push good x'ter w/ kids. Cheer leaders.*
11. What effects did BOA Middle's character education program have on discipline at the school? *discipline dropped. After 2010 discipline spiked. Everyone could get behind it. The ppl make the difference. Push from admin. is critical. GREAT QUOTE HERE.*
12. How was student achievement impacted as a result of BOA Middle's character education program? *Students grew. Proficiency went up. happy kids - kids in class. no 1 thing did it all by itself.*
13. What do you wish other people knew about implementing the character education program at BOA Middle? *Takes committed group of ppl... Extreme ldrshp team. Principal → APs consistent msg.*
14. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding your thoughts on implementing the character education program at BOA Middle? *Good quote PPI knew the kids w/ diversity. Good quote. I thought it was a good program.*